Summary

When Solas again became Fen'Harel, the Inquisitor vanished.

Unseen but not forgotten she watched as the Veil was destroyed, as the Evanuris were freed, as the world again went to war. She bore witness to the devastation knowing she could have stopped it, if only. As years passed she became a wanderer, a chronicler, using words to capture all the terrible things her decision had wrought on the world, using words as penance for all she hadn't done.

And using words, unwittingly, to lure the Dread Wolf to her door.
The ground gives way

As inns went, The Hermit’s Crossing was remarkably nondescript. The exterior was drab and weathered, the roof bearing numerous patches as evidence of the struggle to combat its dilapidation. The two story building was rectangular and squat, looking smaller than it actually was. A great many of its windows were broken and boarded over and those that did remain intact were filthy enough that at night all you could see through them was the muted glow of lamplight. The door to the front entrance hung crooked and didn’t shut completely and was subsequently subject to causing a racket when the wind blew hard enough. There was no elaborate, whimsical sign advertising that it was an inn. The only label the building bore was “The Hermit’s Crossing” carved in crooked letters into a board nailed above the door.

The interior of the inn was just as unremarkable as the exterior, though in better shape. The main room was large and open with tables strewn haphazardly throughout. The innkeep’s station was in the corner opposite the entrance. To the right of the station was the open doorway that led to the kitchen and next to it, the stairs that lead to the second floor. During the day enough light filtered in throughout the remaining windows to illuminate—somewhat—the room. At night, lanterns hung in every corner and set on every other table granted it a certain kind of ambiance that nothing else could.

Despite how unexceptional The Hermit’s Crossing was, its location ensured a reliable if intermittent stream of business. Situated on the flats on the eastern edge of the Southron Hills, directly west of the remains of the Imperial Highway, it was a convenient place for travelers making their way into the northern reaches of Ferelden to stop and seek comfort for a night or two. A luxury accommodation it was not, but for many people it was still better than a night spent on the hard ground. This was especially true now, in late autumn, with the promise of winter lending a haggard chill to the air.

The sun had long since set this night. Bravis Porral, owner of the inn, was seated at his desk. Business was slower this evening despite the fact that the weather had taken a distinct turn for the worse. A fire blazed in the massive hearth on the north wall, taking the edge off the cold that crept in from the boarded up windows. When not tending the bar or serving food, Bravis preferred to sit and observe those around him. He liked wondering about where his patrons had come from and where they were going. He was not above asking as much either.

Aside from Bravis himself there were currently only four others in the inn, all of them human, all seated in the main room. People tended to travel in pairs or groups these days, a decision that proved more than wise given the instability in the area since the Sundering of the Veil and the ensuing war. After Fen’Harel had destroyed the Veil, after the Fade and all its denizens had bled into the waking world and enveloped it in raw chaos, after the elves had reinstated themselves as a sovereign power by claiming a large part of the Brecilian forest as their own, to say Ferelden was still reeling from the upheaval was an understatement of massive proportions. It hadn’t been unusual to see armed travelers entering the inn before the Sundering; to see anyone unarmed now was a rarity.

Of the four patrons in the inn, three were seated at the same table. Two of them were a married couple and were taking turns speaking in low tones to the third, a dark-haired woman who was leaning over a small book, writing with a deft hand, recording what she was being told. Every so often she would pause in her writing to dip her quill pen into the small ink reservoir situated next to the book. The three of them had been at it for hours, since before the sun had set, and Bravis wondered not for the first time what exactly was being said. He’d tried eavesdropping but their quiet conversation hadn’t carried.
The fourth patron was a large man, both broad and tall. When he’d first come to the inn Bravis had noticed instantly that he was well-equipped for travel throughout Ferelden, wearing heavy plate armor that was obviously well-cared for despite its many dents. He’d also carried a shield and a longsword, both of which he handled with easy familiarity. He’d pegged the man instantly as a mercenary. As to the man’s traveling partner, the woman who even now was scribing whatever it was she was being told, Bravis was less sure as to her occupation. The warrior and his companion had entered alone, well after the married couple. The pairs hadn’t known each other, of that he was certain—he’d watched the dark-haired woman approach the husband and wife and introduce herself. His curiosity had grown as, after a short bit of conversation, the woman had removed the book and her writing implements from the pack she carried and begun to write as the others spoke.

Bravis saw a chance to satisfy his curiosity as the warrior approached his station. The big man had been seated by himself at a corner table, leaning back in his chair, idly puffing a pipe and sipping at his ale. He seemed unperturbed by his companion’s desertion, content enough to sit on his own for a long while. As he drew near Bravis studied him under the guise of being eager to serve. The man had a head of thick dark hair threaded through with grey, worn long to his shoulders, and most of his face was covered by a thick mustache and beard. After he and the woman had paid for a room and two stalls in the stable for their mounts, he’d taken most of their gear upstairs. He’d left his armor there and was clad now in simple roughspun clothing, but Bravis noted he still wore his sword belt.

“Is there anything you’d like?” Bravis asked as the man stopped before his desk.

“Food,” said the man. “And something hot to drink.”

“For both of you …?”

The warrior half-turned to glance back at his companion who was still thoroughly engrossed in her work. His sigh, though quiet, was still audible to Bravis. “For both of us,” he said, turning back to face the innkeep.

“We’ve venison stew, potato soup, bread baked fresh today—”

“The stew. And bread. And tea. Don’t care what kind.” From a pouch tied at his belt he withdrew some coins and tossed them down onto the desk. Bravis scooped them up, mentally totaled the amount, and nodded. He rose from his chair, ready to relay the order to the cook. The man held up a hand to stop him.

“Bring it to my table when it’s ready. Don’t disturb her. She’ll eat when she’s ready.”

Bravis didn’t miss the way the warrior’s voice gentled when he spoke of the woman. “Of course, ser,” he said with a smile. He hesitated, his curiosity getting the better of him. “What did you say your name was?”

The warrior and the woman hadn’t in fact revealed their names earlier. The bearded man eyed the innkeep for a long moment. “Rainier,” he finally said.

“And the lady?”

There was another pause. “Boone.”

Rainier and Boone. He didn’t recognize the names, of course, and hadn’t really expected to. Bravis dropped his voice until it was just above a whisper, leaning in closer. “If you don’t mind my asking, how’d the lady lose her arm? Was it the demons or the elves?”

Again the man turned to look at his companion where she sat leaning over her book, using her right
hand to write with swift, sure strokes. What remained of her left arm extended only to her elbow, the 
sleeve of her shirt hemmed to accommodate that fact.

“The Sundering,” the big man replied, and there was an odd lilt to his words. Bravis had heard it 
before, many times over the past ten years.

“Sorry to hear it,” he said, and there was a genuine note of compassion in his voice. “I’ll get the cook 
going. Bring it to you when it’s done.”

The warrior nodded his thanks before making his way back to his own table. Bravis watched him go, 
watched as the woman—Boone—glanced up as he passed. Watched as she smiled a small, soft smile 
at Rainier, watched as Rainier gave her one in return. Bravis felt a peculiar kind of compassion in 
observing them. He knew very little about them and even less about where they came from, but it 
seemed to him that theirs was a story written with no small amount of sorrow. He shook his head 
before heading for the kitchen, ducking his head inside to relay the warrior’s order to his cook before 
returning to his desk.

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By the time Boone returned to their table her food had already gone cold. It didn’t seem to bother 
er, though—after stowing her writing tools and the book in her pack, she tucked into her meal as 
though starving. Which, Thom Rainier mused fondly, she probably was. When she was writing, she 
tended to lose all track of time. The married couple she’d been speaking to had retired to their room 
for the night. The main room was empty but for Rainier, Boone, and the innkeep.

As she ate, Rainier couldn’t help but study her. He did it often. He found comfort in the familiar 
curves and angles of her face. As it had with him, the strain of the past few years had left its trace on 
her. There were a few more faint lines at the corner of her eyes, a perpetual solemnity in the line of 
her mouth. And, sometimes, he caught sight of the pall in her dark eyes that hadn’t been there when 
first he’d met her all those years ago.

He gave her a few minutes before he spoke. “So. What was their tale of woe?”

The look she slanted up at him from beneath her lashes was one of mild reproach. She took her time 
chewing before she responded. “Not as bad as it could have been. Not as bad as some others. They 
were farmers, but their bann lost his estate when the Elvhen made the push across the Bannorn. They 
were caught in the fray. They managed to get away but … the estate was burned to the ground. 
There was nothing they could salvage.”

“They were lucky,” Rainier said after a moment.

“Yes,” she agreed, leaning back in her chair. She toyed with what was left of her bread with the 
fingers of her good hand, tearing at it.

“What happens tomorrow?”

His question jerked her attention away from whatever thoughts she’d been lost in. Her gaze found 
his and he read the answer there before she spoke. “Tomorrow … it’s time I head for home, Thom.”

He nodded slowly. There were words, so many, that he could say and she knew he was considering 
them. It was part of a delicate argument they’d bandied back and forth for years now. She watched 
instead as the lines of his face settled into an expression of weary resignation. Picking up his empty 
bowl and mug, he pushed himself away from the table and stood.

“I’ll be turning in, then,” he said.
“Thom,” she said, softly pleading.

His eyes met hers and he smiled, but it was a sad smile, and it made something within Boone’s chest ache. “I know,” he told her. “I always have. I always will.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but as always when this particular issue arose between them, she could find no words that would mend this wound. “Sleep well,” she finally said.

He nodded again before departing, depositing his burden at the innkeeper’s station before heading up the stairs to the second floor. Boone listened to his heavy tread, familiar with the sound. Often it brought her comfort, the sound of his footsteps. Other times, like tonight, it made her ache for myriad reasons, all of them complicated.

The innkeeper approached her table to take her empty bowl and uneaten bread. “Will there be anything else, serrah?”

“Thank you, no,” she replied.

“I’ll be locking up soon, then. I’ll leave you your lantern.”

She nodded her understanding, noticing the way his eyes lingered on the empty space where her left arm had once been. “Good night then,” he bid her, and she murmured the same back to him.
Craddling her mug of tea in her good hand, she watched as the innkeeper moved from table to table, putting out the lanterns. After he’d locked and barred the front door and disappeared through the door in the back she set her mug down and reached for her pack where it rested on the floor. Setting it on the table, she unbuckled the flap and rummaged around within, pulling out the small leather-bound book she’d been writing in earlier. Placing it flat on the table, she thumbed through the pages, eyes skimming over her own thin, slanted script. It was a collection of stories she’d gathered from anyone who’d been willing to share with her. Every entry was another account of how the Sundering had ruined lives, ended lives, tormented lives.

Every entry was another reminder of how she had failed all those years ago.

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Rainier and Boone departed early the next morning, before the sun had fully risen. In the semi-dark Rainier led their horses out of the ramshackle stable as Boone waited by the door. It was cold enough that every breath rose as vapor, and Boone pulled her lined cloak tighter around herself.

Rainier had saddled her horse as he usually did. It was something she could manage herself if it came down to it, but she appreciated his gesture nonetheless. He stopped in front of the inn, handing Boone the reins as she approached. Mounting with one arm required she grip both the reins and the pommel of the saddle with one hand before swinging herself up and over. Rainier had also mounted, and with a nod in her direction, urged his gelding into a walk. With a last glance at the inn, Boone nudged her mare after him.

They spent the first part of the morning traveling in silence. This was not unusual; familiar enough they were with each other that they could pass considerable lengths of time in comfortable stillness. The day warmed little with the rising of the sun and Boone, though dressed in layers and wearing her cloak, found herself thinking wistfully of the fireplace back at the inn. Rainier, seasoned adventurer that he was, was little bothered by variations in temperature. He wore his armor and she found the way it rattled softly with every step his horse took rather soothing.

The road they followed was one of the main routes north, running parallel to the edges of the
Brecilian Forest some several miles to the east. Eventually it would split into three separate
directions: east to Denerim, northeast to Amaranthine, west through the Bannorn. It was familiar
country to them both, though since the Sundering and the seizure of the Brecilian Forest by the elves
it had undergone a considerable span of upheaval. Things had settled somewhat in the years since the
defeat of the False Gods that had been released by the dissolution of the Veil. Travel through
Ferelden was no longer assuredly fraught with peril, but venturing out alone for long distances still
wasn’t advisable.

Boone and Rainier began to converse as the day approached mid-afternoon. Conversation flowed
easily between them, as it always had, and they spoke of fond memories and recent adventures. They
studiously avoided discussing certain parts of their shared history and arrangement that suited them
both well. They made camp that night not far from the road in a small copse of trees. A fire was
necessary given the cold and they supped on bread and cheese they’d purchased from the innkeep.
Rainier took the first watch, rousing Boone a few hours before dawn for her shift. The next day
broke clear and cold and after a breakfast that mirrored their dinner the night before they were on
their way yet again.

Mid-morning they encountered other travelers, a group of four humans headed north in a large
wagon drawn by a team of horses. It was clear they were apprehensive of the two riders but Rainier
greeted them warmly, drawing his horse alongside the wagon, and after a few minutes of pleasant
conversation the tension eased. They were a family of siblings, all fair-haired and blue-eyed, two
brothers and two sisters. Boone listened as they told Rainier of their reason for traveling—their
homestead, near the Brecilian Passage, was now a part of the new elven nation of Era’Adahlen.

“Forced off the land that belonged to our father, and his father before him,” said one of the brothers
bitterly. His name was Druss, and he sat in the back of the wagon with his two sisters, Lanna and
Filde. The wagon was crammed to the point of spilling over with the random, everyday objects
people accumulate; this wagon contained their entire life’s belongings.

“On our way to petition King Alistair for support,” said the other brother, Radd, who drove the
wagon. “Us and every other bloody family affected by this bullshit. Hopeless, of course—the king’s
got too much to deal with. But we need to try.”

One of the sisters had begun to weep softly. The other put an arm around her consolingly, her own
eyes wet. Druss picked up where his brother had left off. “The elves—Elvhen, they insist they are
now—forced us out with no warning. Armed group just showed up one morning, tell us we’re sitting
on land that’s not ours anymore. Gave us three hours to pack up and go.”

Filde, the sister not weeping, spoke. “I asked them, what will you do with the land? And I get told
that it’ll be for “their own” now. Born there, raised there, worked the land our whole lives and they
take it, just like that, and give it to their own kind.”

Rainier’s expression had become increasingly grim as they told their story. He exchanged glances
with Boone from across the wagon. “Didn’t harm you, did they?

“Would have, if we’d put up a fight,” spat Radd. “And Maker, but how I wished I could swing a
sword.”

“Then you’d be dead and we’d be short a fool for a brother,” snapped Filde. Lanna began to sob in
earnest.

“No, they did us no harm,” Druss said darkly, “Aside from stealing our livelihood right out from
under us. Now we’re like all the others, no home, no livestock, no way to live. Refugees.”
“The fucking Veil,” Lanna said, voice wavering, wiping furiously at her wet cheeks with the back of one hand, “The fucking Veil and the fucking Elvhen and that fucking Fen’Harel! I wish the Maker’d smite dead anyone who uses magic!”

Druss reached out to console his sister by tenderly wiping away her tears with his thumb. “At least with the Breach there was the Inquisition. When the Veil came down there was nothing but chaos and then the Evanuris—”

Boone abruptly kicked her horse into a brisk trot and then a canter, guiding her horse around the wagon. The four siblings watched her go before simultaneously turning their heads to Rainier, the questions clear on their faces.

“She went through a lot after … after the Sundering,” Rainier said roughly, his eyes on Boone as she ranged ahead. “Lost her arm.”

“Lost plenty more than that, I’d wager,” Druss said.

“Aye,” the warrior replied in a far quieter voice, “she did.”

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They all made camp that night not far from the road, in the middle of what had once been a farmer’s field. Years of skirmishes between Ferelden and the newly created Era’Adahlen had left the adjoining homestead abandoned, the fields untended. What fences remained were broken or missing entirely. The siblings—the Landers, they introduced themselves as—were generous with what food they had, and Boone and Rainier shared freely what supplies they had as well.

With the meal finished and the horses tended to, the six of them gathered around the large fire Rainier had built. Conversation waxed and waned as the evening went on, until finally Boone, who had been mostly silent, made the most of a lull in discussion to ask if the four siblings would mind if she chronicled their story.

“But why?” Lanna’s question was mirrored in the expressions of her sister and brothers.

“Because,” Boone said, “it is important that it’s remembered, what happened to you, what happened to everyone.”

“History rarely records what happens to the regular folk,” Rainier added. “It’s all about the lords and ladies, the generals and the kings. Nobody gives a good goddamn about the others that get shit on.”

“But you do,” Filde said, looking back to Boone.

“I do,” Boone said softly. “So does Rainier. So do others, somewhere out there.”

The siblings exchanged glances. It was Druss that nodded his slow approval. “Then you write our story. You write it and you carry it with you. You don’t let it be forgotten.”

“I won’t,” said Boone, retrieving her small leather book and writing tools from her pack. Once she was prepared, she looked up at them all with a nod. “Tell me everything that happened.”

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Two more days travel put the small group close to the borders of South Reach. It seemed autumn was making one last struggle against the encroach of winter, and each subsequent day was warmer than the last. The Lander siblings had warmed to Rainier and Boone and it was clear that they felt far
safer traveling with the warrior and his companion than they had alone. Boone’s earnest interest in
preserving not only their account of what had happened at the hands of the Elvhen, but that of others
as well had made a good impression. Despite this, Boone tended to be more of a listener than a
speaker, and when she did speak she had little to say. Rainier on the other hand was more than
happy to engage in conversation, enjoying the opportunity to speak at length on most any topic.

The ambush, when it happened on the third morning, was both swift and completely unanticipated.

They’d spent the night in the lee of an old stone wall, the remnants of Tevinter ruins that littered
Ferelden’s landscape. Boone had taken last watch, sitting cross-legged, leaning back against a large
stone that had toppled from the wall centuries before. She was fighting off sleep, lulled by the sound
of the light breeze, blinking hard in a bid to keep her eyes open. Balanced on her knees was one of
her books which she’d been reading before the weariness set in. Her head dipped and she startled
awake, blinking hard. It took her a long moment to realize that there was someone standing just
beyond the ring of the dying fire’s light, someone that hadn’t been there a few minutes before.

Scrambling to her feet, she shouted, “Rainier!”

He was standing with his weapon held at the ready a heartbeat later, but it was already too late. Their
small campsite was surrounded, more figures shaping themselves out of the dark. She saw instantly
that most of them were wielding bows, and as two stepped forward into the fire’s light Boone felt her
stomach drop.

“Elves.” Rainier echoed her thoughts, that one word heavy with dismay.

The Lander siblings had been roused by her shout but had reacted more slowly that Rainier. They
were all standing, Lanna clinging terrified to Radd, Filde and Druss backed against the wall.

“What do you want?” Boone almost didn’t recognize her own voice, clear and steady as it issued the
demand. It reminded her of another time when she’d been another person, comfortable with
delivering commands.

“To know why your group is trespassing on Elvhen lands.” The speaker was male, dark-haired,
dark-eyed. He hadn’t drawn his weapon, but Boone could see the hilt of a sword visible over his
shoulder.

“Elvhen lands?” Rainier’s voice climbed upward in angry disbelief. “We’re miles from the Brecilian.
We’re on the bloody fringes of South Reach!”

The elven man ignored Rainier’s statement. “We’ve received reports of Fereldens supplying
weapons with the Chasind. We cannot allow that to happen.”

It was common knowledge that by claiming the Brecilian Forest as their own, the elves had
agonized the Chasind that dwelled in the neighboring Korcari Wilds. The Chasind Wilders, a tribe
of humans with ancient roots, had responded to the rebirth of the Elvhenan with violence. However,
they were outnumbered by a wide margin and lacked any kind of organized military force, lashing
out instead as small, independent clans. While Ferelden and Era’Adahlen were currently engaged in
an uneasy, tenuous ceasefire, the Chasinds, who didn’t consider themselves Fereldens, were still
committed to fighting the trespass on their territory. It made sense that some Fereldens, having
suffered through the war that the leader of the elves had brought on by tearing down the Veil, would
look for whatever ways they could to circumvent the ceasefire by providing supplies to the Chasind.

“The Chasind are south,” Rainier growled.
“Yes,” the elf said, “and that is the way you came.”

“You cannot possibly—” Boone’s words died immediately as the other elf that had stepped forward, a woman, turned to look at her. She was startlingly familiar — the pale gray eyes, the unremarkable face and the shock of short-cropped blonde hair struck Boone with the powerful notion that this was someone she needed to remember.

“We’re farmers,” Druss was protesting loudly. “And we’re without a farm, because of your people! Took it from us just like that, and all we’ve got left in the world is in this goddamn wagon!”

“Search the wagon,” was the dark-haired elf’s calm reply.

“Keep your fucking hands off our wagon!” Radd had pushed his sister behind him and stepped forward, both fists clenched, voice trembling with rage and indignation. The sound of several bow strings being drawn taut immediately followed his outburst.

“Easy, boy,” Rainier cautioned, eying the elven archers encircling them.

Druss moved forward to place a restraining hand on his brother’s arm. Radd shook him off with a furious snarl, shoving him away. He turned, clearly intending to lunge at the elf that had spoken, but was yanked backward by Rainier’s arm going around his neck.

“You’ll get us all killed!” Rainier wrenched Radd backwards, tightening his hold in order to subdue the boy. It was the sound of his sister’s frightened weeping that finally penetrated his haze of fury, and Radd abruptly sagged in Rainier’s hold.

Three of the elves approached the wagon and begin to rifle through the contents, tossing things over the side without any regard to fragility. The sisters stood huddled together, Druss standing with his arm around them both. They all watched with wide angry and frightened eyes as the elves handled all they had left in the world with casual disregard.

The female elf was still staring at Boone. Boone was staring back, frantically searching her memories for some vivid clue as to why she recognized this woman. She was feeling the encroach of panic, unrelated to the ambush, a shiver of apprehension that she couldn’t explain. The elven woman looked away finally, and moved toward the wall Boone had been leaning against before the ambush. Boone realized what she was doing too late, and as the woman leaned down to retrieve the fallen book Boone lunged forward only to be intercepted by the elf that had spoken. The point of his sword hovered directly beneath her chin.

The elven woman was crouching, flipping through the pages of the book. Recognition struck Boone then, washing over her with tidal force. She knew why the face was so familiar, so distressing. It was the face of a spy, one of his spies, and the last time she’d seen it had been at Halamshiral so many years ago … And now she was reading Boone’s words, words that revealed every innermost thought and feeling Boone had ever had for years—

Boone’s eyes found Rainier’s from across the fire. Still holding onto Radd, he too had realized what was happening and in his expression saw her own worry reflected back at her. She looked back to the dark-haired elf and took several steps back in defeat. He nodded mute approval, slowly lowering his sword.

The only sounds for long minutes after that were that of the elves sorting through the wagon, the weeping of the Lander sisters, and the soft rustle of turning pages. Boone watched as the elven woman slowly read pages that were not meant to be read, a knot of fear and outrage lodged firmly in her throat. When the elves had finally emptied the wagon and gone through everything carried
within, they turned to their leader.

“Nothing,” one of them said.

“Check their packs,” he ordered.

They did as commanded, emptying every pack scattered around the campfire and combing through the contents. The elven woman did the same with Boone’s pack. Upon finding two more books and flipping quickly through them, she lifted her eyes to Boone. Her face was expressionless, but her eyes dropped from Boone’s face to what remained of her left arm and back again.

“Still nothing,” reported one of the elves.

“Very well.” The leader beckoned his group to rejoin him. To Rainier he said, “You understand why we must do this?”

“I understand that you’re making yourself feel big by bullying humans and pretending it’s for your cause,” Rainier replied, not even trying to disguise the disgust in his tone.

The elven leader’s smile was chill. “I would guard my tongue more closely, shem, especially this close to our lands.”

“Your lands,” Rainier spat the words out slowly, derisively. He’d released Radd and the boy had quickly raced to where his siblings were huddled.

The elves began to depart, crossing the campsite. The elven woman stood. In her hands she held the book that Boone had dropped earlier, leaving the other two behind. A protest rose in Boone’s throat but she choked it back, unable to give voice to her protest for so many reasons. She watched in mute dismay as the woman circled the fire, book in hand, to rejoin her companions. The elf leader gave the humans all one last dismissive glance before turning and walking away. The woman paused before following, half-turning to look directly at Boone.

“Safe travels, Inquisitor,” she said in a low, clear voice.

And Boone closed her eyes as the secrecy she’d spent ten years fabricating was suddenly torn apart.

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We ride home, shadowed

The last entry in the book the elven woman had taken with her was one that Boone had memorized, not out of desire or fond recollection, but out of guilt. The words she’d written on that particular day had sealed not only her fate but the fate of countless others. They were the words she whispered to herself on the nights she couldn’t sleep, the words she would carry with her from this world into the next, when she would surely be made to suffer for what she hadn’t done.

It read simply:

_The Inquisitor is dead. The Inquisition is no more._

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The silence that had fallen after the departure of the elves was broken by Lanna’s quavering voice. “W-what did she mean? Boone? She called you—”

“—Inquisitor,” Druss whispered.

Rainier was moving, striding quickly toward Boone. His tone was clipped and gruff as he spoke to the siblings. “You’d be a fool to believe anything they said.”

“But _that_, that was the truth, wasn’t it? Rainier?” Druss gently pushed Lanna aside. “Boone? Is that how you lost your arm? To the Anchor?”

“What did she read in your book?” Radd was approaching, too. Rainier stood stiff and tense beside Boone, his sword still in his hand. The other hand he held out, palm up as a warning in Radd’s direction. The boy ignored him, focused entirely on the woman at his side. “What did it say?”

Filde, the quiet, stoic sister, supplied the only question that mattered. “Are you the Inquisitor?”

But Boone could not answer, would not answer. She shook her head a little wildly, rendered mute by a gamut of emotions that she’d kept bottled for far too long. She reached for Rainier and clutched at his shoulder desperately, wordlessly imploring him to do something.

Her distress was evident. “Maker,” Druss breathed. “It _is_ true.”

“Where were you?” Lanna’s hands were knotted in the front of her dress, twisting back and forth. “All this time, where were you?”

Filde had stepped up beside her sister, expression grave. “We heard you’d died—that was what was told. That the Inquisition was no more because you were dead.” She paused, tilting her head, eyes fixed upon Boone. “Why won’t you say anything?”

Boone swallowed hard, unable to hold Filde’s gaze, unable to look at the others. It was Rainier that answered in her stead. “You don’t know what happened then.”

“We know the Inquisitor was gone. We know the Inquisition was disbanded, even though it could have done something to stop the Dread Wolf—”

“There was no stopping him.” It was the first thing Boone had said since the elves had ambushed them. Her voice was high, strident. “I couldn’t have stopped him. Nobody in this world could.”
"How do you know?"

*Because I stood before him, Boone wanted desperately to say, I stood before him and watched as he turned the Viddasala to stone with a thought. I watched as he tamed the Anchor with a glance. I saw the shadow of eons in his eyes, listened to the voice of a man who’d exiled gods …*

Those words would fall empty on their ears, she knew. They wanted to hear what they wanted to hear and Boone’s explanation for a decision made in haste and fear and sorrow wouldn’t satisfy them. She knew nothing would.

Radd asked then, “Did you even try to stop him?”

And Boone was struck mute again from shame, from guilt, battering her from all directions. The truth was so complicated, so painful, so *damning*.

“That’s enough,” Rainier warned them. “You weren’t there. You don’t know.”

But the time had passed for warnings. The time had passed for reason. The four siblings, having seen their world nearly torn apart twice in their lifetime, had always unconsciously been looking for someone to blame.

They’d just found that someone.

“Craven,” Lanna said in a low voice, her eyes narrowed to slits as she glared at Boone.

“Go to the horses.” Though Rainier’s words to her were calm, Boone knew by the set of his shoulders that he was anything but. He hadn’t sheathed his sword and while he wasn’t holding it defensively, the fact that the blade was still naked said a great deal.

Druss had drawn closer even closer. “You’d leave us here, now, after what just happened?”

Radd laughed and it was short, ugly, an insult born of disbelief and anger. “You want help from an old man and a cripple, Druss? She’s not the Inquisitor anymore. Look at her. No mark on her hand to save the world.”

“Save it?” Lanna’s voice was just as ugly. “Like she saved it before? How could you just slip away and let it all happen?” Her next words caught on a sob, the fear from what had just happened with the elves combining with the tumult wrought by the past few years. “How could you just let it happen?”

Rainier moved so swiftly it was startling, leaving Boone’s side and stalking toward Lanna. The girl shrank away with a gasp, stumbling into her brothers. “You weren’t there,” the warrior said, nearly snarling, lowering his face until it was directly in front of hers. “You don’t know what it was like. That woman,” he gestured over his shoulder to where Boone stood, “bled for everyone in Thedas. She bled for you. She used the Anchor to close every goddamn rift she could find. She spent years fixing the fucking world while people like you cowered in their houses waiting for someone else to save them! She closed the fucking Breach, but that wasn’t enough for you?”

Lanna was weeping openly, face turned away from Rainier, as Druss put his arms around her from behind. “Tell me, girl, what did you do, while she was fighting demons and Templars and Corypheus? What did any of you do?”

He took a step backward, breathing hard, hands tightening into fists. “Do you know how she got the bloody Anchor?”
“Thom, don’t—”

He silenced Boone with a sharp backward glance before turning back to the siblings. “The Anchor was caused by a relic of Fen’Harel’s. He all but gave it to Corypheus so that Corypheus would tear down the Veil. That was his plan. And she—she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Corypheus’ plan backfired and the Anchor became hers. The Breach was Fen’Harel’s doing, and she closed it!”

Abruptly Rainier whirled, striding swiftly past Boone, toward the horses that were tethered near the broken wall. He began saddling them, every movement jerky and abrupt. The siblings were standing in a loose huddle, silent but for Lanna’s sobs, their eyes fixed on Boone. Dawn was approaching, the sky lightening, and Boone could read their expressions clearly. She saw how the tempest of the past years had eroded them all. The four siblings, like everyone else in Thedas, had been utterly helpless as forces beyond their ken strove to tear the world apart. She understood their reaction to discovering who she really was. She understood because she agreed—she hadn’t done everything. She hadn’t challenged Fen’Harel.

She’d failed.

She wanted to say something to the siblings. She wanted to apologize, to explain, but she knew there were no words she could give them that would make things right. She turned, resigned and saddened, moving to help Rainier with the horses. They proceeded in grim silence. Once the horses were saddled Boone retrieved their packs, gathering the items that had been scattered by the elves. She looked one last time to the Landers siblings. Filde and Radd had begun to refill the wagon with their belongings. Lanna had sank to the ground before the embers of the fire, wiping at her eyes with one hand. Druss was crouched beside her, his arm around her. He looked up to meet Boone’s gaze and his mouth twisted bitterly.

Boone turned away. Rainier held her mare as she mounted and in short order the two of them were riding away from the camp, away from the siblings and their wagon. Neither looked back.

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Hours later, they were well north of where the ambush had happened, nearly into the Bannorn. No words had been spoken since they’d left. They had each of them needed the quiet, mired as they were in their own respective thoughts. Rainier had been her closest friend for a very long time. After the confrontation with Solas in the Crossroads and the dissolution of the Inquisition, it was Rainier who had helped her slip away, helped her to shed the identity of the Inquisitor and become someone else instead. When she had finally realized the immensity of Solas’ game something inside her had been altered, irrevocably and monumentally. It was as though whatever had fueled her passion, her drive, her very will had been consumed by Solas’ betrayal. She’d felt like a ghost, separated from this world, looking in on the vivid colors and sounds from the outside.

It was Rainier, a man who’d also been broken and had worked with stoic resolve to piece himself together again, that understood better than the others what she was experiencing. She’d given everything she was to what most had viewed as the insurmountable task of defeating Corypheus. After that she’d devoted herself entirely into righting whatever remaining wrongs existed in the land. She was no saint, completely selfless and without mortal failing, but she’d been given a power and she’d done her best to wield it in a way that was just. To discover that everything that had transpired had been set in motion by Solas, to discover that ultimately she’d been his pawn all along—it had shattered the beliefs and values she’d built since receiving the Anchor. She’d trusted Solas implicitly. She’d valued his insight, depended on his advice. And—

She’d cared for him.
That particular thought still stung even now, and so she quickly banished it away. Boone had struggled to leave the thoughts and emotions associated with her time as the Inquisitor behind. Aided a great deal by Rainier, she’d created another life for herself, such as it was, far from the political maneuvering and tensions she’d come to detest, far too from the friends and alliances she’d made. She couldn’t rejoin her family in Ostwick, didn’t want to—she had been a long time away, and whatever familial bonds she’d had had dulled and faded. Suddenly faced with the prospect of life without the Anchor, without a purpose she’d been forced into, she’d found herself utterly lost for the first time in her life.

Rainier had given her direction, though it hadn’t amounted to much at first. As a child growing up as part of the minor nobility of the Free Marches, Boone had had a privileged upbringing. Her schooling had been expansive and thorough. She’d discovered at an early age a fondness for literary study which had grown quickly into a love of writing. It didn’t matter if she was scribing the work of another or writing her own silly adolescent poetry—there was something enchanting in the way the point of the quill glided across the parchment, the way incorporeal words took form, guided by her own hand. That enchantment had stayed with her as she aged and even during her time as the Inquisitor she’d always managed to make time to write, filling small leather-bound books to the brim with poetry and observations and, more importantly, the day to day chronicles of her life.

Rainier, knowing as all the other companions did of her passion, had encouraged her to pursue it after she’d ceased being the Inquisitor. At first he did so because he believed it would help her heal. It did in some ways, slowly, bit by bit. And as time passed, as the world suffered because the Inquisitor had not stopped Solas—had not even tried—Boone realized writing could provide her with something else. And so it was she’d begun collecting the stories of those affected by the Breach and the Sundering, those who otherwise could have lived lives full and happy and blissfully unaware of what dangers lurked beyond the fringes of the world. Chronicling their stories was her penance for her inability, for her cowardice, and with every tale she collected she ached for the loss the others experienced, for the hardships they’d endured. Rainier had not at first approved of this method of self-castigation, but in this Boone would not be deterred. Eventually it became her calling, to the point where she—sometimes accompanied by Rainier—would venture forth, making her way across Ferelden and Orlais in order to collect more of these stories.

In the ten years since she’d lost her arm, since the events at Halamshiral, Boone had filled book upon book with the accounts of the people of Thedas. She kept them all, secure within several locked chests within the small building she’d called home for some years now. To anyone other than herself they were useless, but they were valuable beyond measure to her. And now the elven woman—Solas’ spy—was in possession of her journal, her diary, the book she’d recorded every significant event and thought that had come to her during her time as the Inquisitor. What was contained within its pages went beyond her frustrations at having to become a political player, or her irritation with Vivienne, or her fondness for Maryden’s songs. The pages of that particular book harbored secrets that had the very real power to undo her.

And now she feared that they finally would.

“They’ll send someone to follow us.”

It was the first Rainier had spoken since they’d taken their leave of the siblings. The sound of his voice startled Boone out of her grim train of thought. They were riding side by side at a brisk walk, the creaking and jingling of the tack creating familiar background noise.

Boone cleared her throat before replying. “I know.”

He turned his head to look at her. The anger he’d unleashed in her defense against the Lander
siblings had long since faded, but his expression knew was one she’d seen before. He looked tired and saddened, and she knew before he opened his mouth what he’d say next.

“Evelyn … come with me, back to the Free Marches.”

“Boone,” she corrected him softly. “And you know I can’t, Thom.”

“Why?” He reined his gelding to a halt, turning in the saddle to face her. “Every time I ask you to go with me, that’s your answer. Our secret is revealed. The Inquisitor is still alive. How long do you think it will take before word gets back to him?”

“And what threat could I possibly pose to him now? You heard Radd and Lanna. I’m a cripple and a coward.”


Boone smiled, a wrenching mix of unhappiness and tenderness. “Thom, my dear, dear friend, thank you for your devotion. But we both know the truth when we hear it.”

He opened his mouth to respond but stopped abruptly, turning his head away. She watched the muscles in his neck work as he swallowed hard, recognized the tension in the set of his jaw. She wanted to reach out to him, wanted him to know that it hurt her to hurt him, but knew those words would fix nothing. They never did.

He said finally, still refusing to look at her, “Come with me. Please.”

She heard it then, what he was trying so hard to tell her and simultaneously hide from her. She’d been aware of the depths of his feelings for quite some time. That he would do anything for her he’d proved time and time again. Her respect and affection for Blackwall were without reserve and absolute, but it wasn’t what he craved from her. It never would be. She loved him, yes, but it was love without ardor. It was the love she bore a friend that meant more to her than anyone else, and it was the love that wounded him every hour he spent in her company.

She replied as she always did to that particular request. “… I’m sorry.”

His head whipped back around and he fixed his dark eyes upon her. She read the hurt there, stormy and deep, and in that moment it was so difficult to hold his gaze. He demanded, “Why? Why won’t you come with me? What is it that holds you here? There’s nothing left here for you but ghosts and regrets.”

Ghosts and regrets that I created. She’d said those words before, countless times, in an argument that was as familiar to them now as breathing. She stayed because Ferelden and Orlais, hardest hit by the Sundering, were a constant reminder of what she’d done and of what she hadn’t done. These places, they’re your hell, he’d told her once. He’d been right.

“Your family—” he started.

“—believes I am dead. And it’s better that way.”

“And should word get back to them that you’re alive?”

Boone would not answer that question. “I won’t go, Thom.”

“I know.” He sighed then, a sound of bone-deep sadness mingled with disappointment. It cut her as deeply as any blade.
They looked away from each other. It was he that spoke next, “I’ll ride with you through the southern fen. Two days straight west and we should be able to lose anyone who tries to follow.”

Staring down at the pommel of her saddle, Boone said quietly, “You could stay.”

“I could. But I signed a contract. Six months work and more coin than I’ve seen in years.”

Out of the corner of her eye she could see that he’d turned, that he was looking at her again. She couldn’t bring herself to lift her eyes to his. “Then it is best I stay here. A mercenary can’t very well have a cripple as a tag-along.”

“You wouldn’t be a tag-along.”

“What would I be, then? Camp follower? Bed warmer?” She knew her choice of words was grating, knew she was getting angry with him simply because she was having difficulty dealing with her own guilt. For years Rainier had tied himself to her, aided her in any way she required because of the depth of his feelings for her. And in return she’d become a burden, a friend who would only ever deliver disappointment and refusal.

She knew she’d hit a nerve because his voice had become taut with anger. “I would never ask that of you, not unless you were willing. And you would never be just that to me.”

She held up her hand, shaking her head. “I know. Thom, I’m sorry. I’m being difficult.”

“As usual.”

 Abruptly, she smiled. So did he. And suddenly the emotional squall between them had cleared, the tension abruptly melting away. This was how it was between them, anger gradually accumulating only to disperse, neither of them willing to push the issue too far.

“The fen, then?”

“All right.” She nodded, then frowned at a sudden thought. “But you’ll miss your boat in Amaranthine.”

“I can find another in Highever. Contract starts the middle of Harvestmere. I have more than enough time.”

Boone did the mental math, adding up seventeen days between now and then. “All right,” she repeated. “We take the fen.”

Rainier twisted around in the saddle, scanning the road behind them. “We best ride through the night, then. Only fools risk would risk following us through there in darkness.”

“Only fools,” Boone echoed, smiling wryly. Looking back to her, he caught her smile and returned it and suddenly she felt heartened, buoyed by this man and his unwavering commitment to her despite all she’d done— and despite all she hadn’t done. She nudged her mare into a walk, reining her around to the left. Rainier followed. When he urged his gelding into a steady trot she did the same, knowing he wanted to reach the edges of the Bannorn’s southern fen before early dark. She glanced over her shoulder more than once, wondering if they actually were being followed. They had hours on their pursuers and soon they’d enter the fen, which would make it exceedingly difficult for anyone to track them.

She hoped it would be enough.
Traveling through the southern fen was unpleasant, to say the least. The first few miles consisted of solid muskeg, which meant that they had to pick their path slowly in order to avoid treading on the thinner patches and risk falling through into the water beneath. The spongy footing made the horses hesitant and they required constant urging to continue. They skirted the worst of it, keeping to the fringes where the grass was shorter and there were fewer dead and stunted trees. Every step the horses took was accompanied by a loud, wet sucking noise as the mud beneath the muskeg pulled at their hooves. Late afternoon became early evening, and as the world darkened Boone wondered if this had in fact been the wisest choice.

Her doubts were assuaged as they usually were by Rainier. The most seasoned traveler she knew, he proceeded with both determination and caution, leading the way with his gelding. They transitioned from the muskeg to the fen proper by the time the stars had appeared overhead. Said stars were soon blocked from sight as the wind picked up, blowing in the dark shadows of clouds from the east. The air, made damp by the moisture of the fen, grew increasingly more chill with each passing hour. Even though her hooded cloak was lined with fur, it wasn’t long before she uncomfortably cold. Still they progressed, their horses doggedly wading through the shallow waters and carefully stepping over moss-encrusted deadfall. Frequently they stopped to allow their mounts a brief respite, allowing them to nip at the fen grasses. By the time the sky began to lighten again with the encroach of dawn, Boone was both exhausted and irritable.

Rainier had found a small bit of higher solid ground ringed by large, mossy trees with long hanging branches. After tending to the mounts, Rainier offered to take first watch. Seeing the dark circles beneath his eyes and the way his shoulders were stooped with weariness, Boone declined the offer. Bleary-eyed, she kept herself awake through the early morning hours by reciting lines of poetry and the lyrics to her favorite songs over and over in her head. When Rainier finally relieved her, she crawled onto his bedroll, curled up on her side, and was instantly asleep.

Rainier roused her as the sun was at its zenith. They ate a quick, cold meal before setting out again. The horses were as reluctant to continue as their riders, frustrated by the terrain. More than once they pinned their ears and crow-hopped in irritation, but proceeded slowly under the gentle persistence of their riders. Both Boone and Rainier were still tired with only having a couple hours of sleep and subsequently said very little to each other as they rode.

It was another day before they were free of the fen, riding out from its oppressiveness into the forest that bordered Lake Calenhad. With the lake in view—vast, waters reflecting the clouds and the sun of the midday sky— they began to head north, eventually leaving the forest behind and entering the grasslands of the Bannorn. It was the fourth day since leaving the siblings behind and they’d been riding almost constantly. They made camp that night in the open, even daring to light a fire in order to roast a rabbit Rainier had managed to kill. They remained the entire night, switching sentry duty halfway, and when morning arrived both felt far better than they had in a while.

They parted ways early the next morning. It was a gray day, the clouds heavy and low and the chill in the air was damp, hinting at rain. Their fire from the night before was dead, the ashes scattered, and both were mounted facing each other.

“Stick to the main road,” Rainier told her. “Stick to villages. Rent rooms each night. Don’t argue about coin,” he said swiftly, seeing her mouth open to make that argument. “I tucked a bit into your pack while you slept. You’ve more than enough to get you home.”

“You shouldn’t have,” she told him, shaking her head even though a strong surge of affection rushed through her.
“I know. But I always do.”

“Yes,” she agreed, her voice warm, “you do.”

He cleared his throat, glancing away. The wind, growing increasingly more persistent, caught at the loose strands of his hair and whipped them across his face. He looked in that moment so noble and grave that she felt the same familiar ache grow in her chest. She wished, so much, that she could love him the way he wanted, the way he deserved.

“I’ll be back when the contract is over,” he said, looking back to her. “Six months, in Drakonis. We’ll do something with the coin—buy a farm, maybe. Breed horses.”

“I’d like that,” she said, meaning it. It was comforting beyond measure to envision a future where he was always near.

“Well,” he sighed after a long span of moments.

“Travel safe, dear one,” she told him, nudging her mare into a sidestep that had her swinging alongside his gelding. She turned in the saddle, reaching out to embrace him. As his arms closed around her she closed her eyes, leaning her head on his shoulder and breathing deep his scent—woodsmoke, leather, sweat—before pulling away.

“Take care of yourself,” he said in a voice that was slightly uneven. “And be careful. And if something happens, anything—you send word to me, care of Lord Chancellor Jerrown out of Tantervale. Promise me.”

“I promise, Thom.”

“Well,” he said again, uncomfortable as always with farewells. His eyes met hers one last time. “Be safe.”

“You too.”

He reined his mount around and began riding north. He didn’t look back. She knew he wanted to. She watched him for a long while before directing her mare northwest and kicking her into a trot. Three more days and they’d be at the Storm Coast. Three more days and they’d be home.

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She did as she’d assured Rainier she’d do and traveled the main roads. This far north it was less perilous than it was in the south near the borders of Era’Adahlen. She encountered several other travelers the first day, all of them human, all of them cordial. The first night she spent in a small village within walking distance of the docks of Lake Calenhad, renting a room in an inn. She left before dawn the next day and traveled far, spending the second night in a farmer’s house, renting out the attic. The third day dawned blustery and damp. As the terrain gradually became stony and rough, as her mare obligingly continued forward despite the inclement weather, Boone felt herself becoming more and more eager to see the familiar sights of the Storm Coast.

Home, such as it was, consisted of a walled compound that had previously belonged to Hessarian militia. It had been Boone in her role as Inquisitor and her companions who had eradicated the Hessarian threat in the area, and when it had come time for her to find a home after she’d made her calamitous decision, she’d had that compound in mind. When she had finally returned to the coast to scout out the area, she’d found the former Hessarian headquarters were now occupied by an old human woman named Movda.
Movda, ancient in appearance, moved with the energy of someone decades younger than herself. When Boone had first encountered her, she’d been tending to the large garden that grew outside the walls of the compound. She’d eyed Boone with no small amount of suspicion, leaning hard on the hoe she’d been using to weed, clearly wondering why a human woman missing an arm would be traversing the Storm Coast with no escort. Boone, still feeling somewhat ragged and broken from recent events, had managed to deliver the story about how she’d heard of abandoned land in need of tenants. It was the partial truth. Movda had mulled that over before nodding her head and beckoning Boone to follow her, turning on her heel, and heading back through the open gate that led to her home.

The compound was as Boone had remembered it. There was an open stable on one side and a small house on the other with a large yard in-between the two. The archery targets and combat dummies the Hessarians had left behind had been piled in one corner of the yard. Movda had rigged up a series of simple wooden pens that fenced in several chickens and four goats. The old woman had told Boone to put her horse in the stable before joining her in the house for some tea. Confused but appreciative of this courtesy, Boone had complied.

Movda was direct and openly calculating. Over tea, she admitted that she lacked the strength and energy to tend to her little farm the way it needed to be tended to. She needed someone younger, someone sturdier, to assist her these days. Her expression was appraising as she said this and Boone had flushed, knowing that lacking one arm made her “sturdiness” questionable.

“Oh, forget that,” Movda had said, gesturing to the arm in question. “I don’t care about it and neither should you. Can you hold a rake with one hand? Can you feed a chicken? Can you close a door? Yes? Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

They’d agreed on a trial period. Boone would stay with Movda for seven days and would help out as directed. If they got on well, Boone would be welcome to live there permanently. The seven days passed quickly, Boone did everything she was asked with determination, and Movda asked her to stay. It was an arrangement that worked well for Boone. Being able to do things around the little farm made her feel useful in ways that she hadn’t for a long time. Though she’d never again hold a bow, never again feel the thrill of letting an arrow fly, she could again have purpose. She grew to love her new home, love the simple rhythm of the days so unlike what she’d known as the Inquisitor. And she grew too to love Movda, with her long gray hair and clear blue eyes and the fact that she’d shown such great generosity to someone she didn’t even know.

It didn’t take long for Boone to realize that Movda also possessed a keen intellect. There were times during the days when she’d catch Movda staring at her with no small amount of speculation, as if she were mentally fitting together the pieces of a puzzle. Boone realized the evidence was all there to anyone looking for it: she was a young human woman missing an arm who had clearly been adrift and without purpose. Feeling she owed Movda an explanation, one night over dinner Boone had revealed the truth, speaking of the day of the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes and everything that had happened later. She’d spoken of the Anchor, of what it could do, of her companions and her affection for them. She’d spoken too of Solas and of his betrayal and when she’d finished, Movda had said nothing, instead leaning back in her chair and puffing idly on her pipe as she considered the woman before her.

“That’s that, then,” she’d said finally, and Boone had breathed a sigh of relief. And so life went on. Rainier had come eventually, also having known of the Hessarian compound. He’d been surprised but pleased by the situation he found. Movda warmed to him immediately and he to her, and while he stayed (sleeping in the barn stalls because the house was too small) he carried out whatever tasks the women asked of him. Since the Inquisition had been disbanded he’d become a mercenary, taking
on small jobs that lasted weeks or months. In his time off he usually drifted back to Boone and Movda, bringing with him whatever supplies he believed they needed and giving them coin that they always protested but were also exceedingly grateful for. When the idea had come to Boone to chronicle the lives of those affected by the Breach and the Sundering, Movda had been supportive. Her own story—the story of a woman whose husband had died at the hands of a terror demon, whose farm had been been burned to the ground by rogue mages—was the first story Boone had ever recorded.

And so once or twice a year Boone would leave the farm to travel in search of more stories to collect. Movda was always waiting for her when she returned, sometimes with Rainier in tow. Boone found herself wondering now what Movda would say about the elven ambush, about the fact that Solas’ spy now had her journal. A firm believer in logic and reason, Movda had a way of looking at life that always managed to take the edge of certain situations.

It was late afternoon by the time Boone and her mare reached the Storm Coast proper. She’d been riding hard the last three days in her eagerness to return home and it was beginning to wear at both her and her mount. The thought of sleeping in her own bed was one she savored. Though she longed to push her mare to a faster pace, the terrain on the coast was unforgiving in many places. Subsequently it was almost full dark by the time the walled farm came into view. The gate was closed, a sign that Movda had retired for the night. As her mare came to halt in front of the gate Boone dismounted, hissing a little as a body made sore from long hours of riding protested the movement. With the reins in hand, she rapped sharply on the wooden gate four times. “Movda,” she called a moment later, pitching her voice so that it would carry.

“… Boone?”

“Who else?”

There was a snort from the other side of the gate and then the sound of approaching footsteps. When the gate swung open, Movda was standing on the other side, lantern in hand, wearing her familiar blue nightdress. She’d freed her pale hair from its braid for the night and it fell over her shoulders in thick waves. She looked Boone up and down before shaking her head. “You look terrible,” she said.

Boone’s lips quirked. “I’ve been riding for days.”

“Well,” Movda said, pushing the gate wide and stepping aside. “I’m glad you had the courtesy to arrive in the middle of the night and wake me up—”

It was Boone’s turn to snort. “You’re never asleep before midnight.”

“No,” Movda agreed, shutting the gate after Boone had lead her mare through. She moved forward, setting the lantern down on the ground and wrapping her arms around Boone. “Welcome home, girl. It’s about damn time.”

Dropping the reins, Boone returned the embrace, holding tight to the older woman before stepping away. She asked, “How have you been?”

Movda’s smile was crooked. “Same as ever. Still breathing. And you? Are you hungry? Tired?”

Boone’s stomach growled at the thought of an actual cooked meal. “I’m famished.”

“Get settled, then. There’s some soup. I’ll warm it for you.” Movda walked to the stable and hung the lantern on a hook there before turning and making her way to the house. Boone led her mare into the largest stall and by the light of the lantern quickly unsaddled her mare, tending to her completely
before grabbing the lantern and making her way to the house.

The house had originally consisted of one room that contained a cooking hearth on the far wall and Movda’s bed against the other. When first she’d arrived Boone had slept on the floor but Rainier, during one of his many visits, had built on two small bedrooms. Movda was standing now before the hearth, ladling soup from the large pot hanging over the fire into a wooden bowl. The savory aroma of the soup immediately set Boone’s mouth to watering and she quickly crossed the floor to toss her pack into her room before returning to take a seat at the square table in the corner, placing her lantern down atop it. Movda placed the full bowl along with a spoon in front of Boone, who began to eat quickly. Movda watched in silence. Minutes later, food gone, Boone pushed the bowl away and settled back in her chair, folding her arms contentedly across her stomach.

Movda asked, “Rainier’s gone, then? Back to the Free Marches?”

Boone nodded. “He’ll return in Drakonis.”

“So long? Damn shame. What about your travels? Was there anything out of the ordinary?”

Boone’s eyes dropped to trace patterns on the table. Movda frowned, recognizing this particular habit as a sign of apprehension. After a minute, Boone spoke. “We traveled with four others for a while. Human. A family, brothers and sisters. One night we were … visited … by an elven patrol.”

“Oh,” Movda said, that one word speaking volumes.

Boone nodded. “They said we were trespassing on their lands, but that was a lie—we were almost to South Reach. They searched our things and said it was because Fereldens are supplying the Chasind with weapons.”

Movda made a rude noise and Boone nodded again. She took a deep breath. “… I recognized one of the elves. A woman. Movda, she was one of Solas’ spies. She was at Halamshiral during the Exalted Council. And she recognized me.”

The older woman’s frown deepened and she leaned forward, bracing her elbows on the table. “Are you certain?”

Boone nodded. “I am. She found my book, the journal I’d kept back then. She read some of it. Before they left, she called me Inquisitor.”

Movda let her breath out in a slow exhale. “And the others, this family, they heard?” It was more a statement than a question.

“Yes.”

“The elf, she took the book?”

“Yes.”

“He’ll know soon, then.”

“He may already know. Rainier and I took the southern fen, through the Bannorn. Rode without stopping a full day and night. It’s nigh impossible to track someone through there.”

“A wise decision. And after Rainier left?”

“Traveled the main roads, but rode hard.”
Movda stood, picking up Boone’s empty bowl and carrying it to the washbasin. Boone said, “I’d be of little use to him now.”

Movda turned back around, arms folded over her chest. Her expression was hard to read, her eyes speculative as she studied the younger woman. “Are you so certain of that?”

Boone’s laugh was forced and uncomfortable. “I have no Anchor. I have no magic. I can no longer wield a bow. I’m no longer the Inquisitor.”

“No,” Movda said, “you aren’t. But that doesn’t mean …”

“Doesn’t mean what?”

But Movda shook her head, abruptly changing the subject. “Are you tired?”

“Yes,” Boone replied as suddenly she was reminded of that fact. Her body ached from long hours spent horseback and her mind was wearied from nights of fitful sleep.

“Go to bed. Rest. We can speak more tomorrow.” Movda picked up her lantern from the mantle above the hearth before walking to the door to her room. She stopped, turning, and smiled at Boone. “I’m glad you’ve returned.”

“So am I,” Boone said with an answering smile. After Movda had gone, she stood, grabbed the remaining lantern, and went to her own room. She undressed quickly, eager to sleep. Her bed frame was nothing remarkable, small and sturdy, but it held a feather tick that Rainier had once brought for her (he’d brought one for Movda, too). With a sigh of pure satisfaction Boone sank down onto it, luxuriating in the fact that she was at long last lying on a surface that wasn’t rock hard or prickly or uneven. She pulled up the blankets folded at the foot of the bed and nestled beneath them. Thoughts of elves and the Inquisition and the choices she had and hadn’t made faded as total exhaustion set in, and in the span of several slow breaths she was asleep.

She slept late into the next day. Upon waking she rolled onto her side and was met instantly with the blinding rays of the sun spilling in from the small window on the opposite wall. Blinking, raising her good arm to block the brightness, she slowly sat up. She ran her hand through her hair, tangled after being left in a braid overnight. The sunlight illuminated the particles of dust that floated through the air and the sight brought on a powerful sense of comfort because this was home.

She left her room dressed in a long, simple blue shift, the one she usually slept in. Movda was seated at the table, cutting raw carrots into small chunks. “Making stew,” she said by way of greeting. “Chicken. Seeing as you’re back now.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Wash.” Movda’s nose wrinkled, but she was smiling. “Barrel’s full.”

“I don’t smell,” Boone said with mock indignation, and as she walked past Movda she rapped the older woman lightly on the head with her fist. It was a beautiful day, most likely the last before the onset of winter, warm enough that Boone could perform her ablutions outdoors. She walked around the corner of the house. A large wooden barrel was situated at the back corner of the house, hidden behind a tall plank fence that provided privacy. It collected the rainwater that fell from the sloped roof—which, at the Storm Coast, was a substantial amount. There was a large clay ewer sitting on the wide rim of the barrel, meant for either procuring a drink or for bathing, and next to it a bar of pale soap and a folded length of thick drying cloth. She smiled. Movda had readied everything.
After checking to see that the gate to the compound was closed, Boone ducked behind the fence. She shimmied out of her shift and hung it on a protruding knot in a slab of wood on the wall in front of her. Using the ewer she proceeded to drench herself. It was the first thorough bathing she’d had in weeks and she took her time, enjoying the sensation of coming clean. Once finished, dried and clad again in her shift, dark hair hanging in wet tendrils down her back, she tossed the drying cloth over the fence to dry before making her way back to the house.

The gate was open now. Movda tended to spend a lot of time in the garden just beyond the compound. After months away, Boone was curious to see what the older woman was growing there now. She strode across the yard, enjoying the way the sun felt on her still damp skin. She walked through the open gate, turned toward the garden, and came to an abrupt halt.

Beneath the shadow of the large poplar tree that bordered the garden was a man seated on a horse. Rainier? No, she realized a heartbeat later, not Rainier. And not a human—

Solas.

Her eyes found his and were riveted; seconds became hours, held captive in that gaze. He was as he’d been the last time she’d seen him, clad in armor that glinted like the sun, bearing the pelt of a wolf—

“Evelyn,” he said softly after a moment, after days.

Her voice had abandoned her and so too had coherent thought. She struggled to find herself again, drowning as she was beneath the sudden onset of internal chaos, and finally she managed to tip reality temporarily back in her favor.

“Boone,” she managed to say in a hollow, hollow voice. “My name is Boone.”

.x.
Old faces, old wounds

x.

21 Guardian
9:41 Dragon

I am the greatest fool in Thedas.

I’ve been unable to look upon Solas with anything close to indifference since the night I dreamed of Haven. Or rather, the night we dreamed of Haven.

I’m no mage. The Fade will always remain a mystery and a fascination to me. Solas has fed that fascination through our discussions, answering all of my questions, describing to me all that he’s seen in his Fade travels. I’ve enjoyed and anticipated our discussions, particularly those regarding the Fade. Our conversations have also wandered to different topics, encompassing the culture of ancient elves and the rise of the Imperium. Even the mundane is something Solas is capable of spinning into a conversation. Just the other day we talked at great length about the merits of any other beverage over tea.

I’ve sought him out for his counsel numerous times over the past few months. Like the others, his advice is sound in that it is grounded in his own integrity. He has sought out my counsel as well, a development which led me to believe we had become friends. That realization was unexpected but not unwelcome, and I think perhaps that is where the trouble began.

That night, in that dream, standing in a Haven not yet destroyed by dragon’s fire and avalanche, everything changed. I don’t know why. I don’t know how.

Solas seemed more energized in the Fade, more content. I listened as he spoke, as we made our way through the Haven that once was until we reached the Chantry.

“I told myself, one more attempt to seal the rifts.” He had turned away from me and reached out with one arm toward the Breach, still ominous and swirling even in the Fade. “I tried and failed. No ordinary magic would affect them. I watched the rifts expand and grow, resigned myself to flee, and then …”

He turned to face me. “It seems you hold the key to our salvation. You had sealed it with a gesture … and right then …”

I’d been so caught up in his words that it took me a moment to realize he hadn’t finished what he’d been about to say. His eyes were fixed on me and his expression was one I’d never seen him wear before. He seemed distressed.

“Solas?”

He blinked, shaking his head. “… I apologize. It’s nothing. Just a thought.”

But I couldn’t shake the feeling that it had been more than that.

He turned abruptly from me, stepping away. I made to follow and halted as he suddenly whirled back around. His brows were furrowed by a V of consternation. It was clear that whatever he’d just realized had vexed him.
“Inquisitor—Evelyn …” He faltered before exhaling sharply, giving his head another quick shake. “You have surprised me since the moment you woke with that mark on your hand. You have never ceased surprising me. Admittedly I’ve had limited interaction with shem—with humans. I have assumed—wrongly—a great many things about your kind, assumptions mired in history that I was reluctant to change. You’ve shown a courage and commitment that I didn’t expect. In watching you I’ve been forced to realize that a great deal of what I’ve believed was wrong.”

“Solas,” I said, both flattered and confused, “It’s—”

He held up a hand to stall me. “You have the very real power to save the world,” he continued. It was as though it was suddenly very hard for him to look at me; he’d fastened his gaze on the ground before my feet. “But you haven’t let that power rule you. You’ve done your best to use your abilities and your influence in ways that are just and rational. You’ve changed not only my opinion, but the opinion of a great many others as well. Inquisitor, do you even know … ? You’ve changed … everything.”

And in that moment, it truly felt as though I had. His eyes had found mine again, clouded by whatever emotion he was struggling with. It seemed he’d astonished himself with that last confession. He’d certainly astonished me. And caught in the moment, propelled by urges so new to me I couldn’t even name them, I did something I will regret for the rest of my days. I lunged two steps forward and kissed him. He stiffened immediately beneath my touch—and then he pushed me away. Gently, yes, but it was still clear that what I’d done had been unwelcome. His eyes were wide, his expression shocked, and with a sudden plummeting sensation I realized how very wrong I’d been.

“Evelyn—Inquisitor—”

I turned from him, even in the dream able to feel the flush of humiliation creeping up my neck and into my face. My voice, when I found it, was choked. “End the dream.”

And he did.

It was days before we next spoke. My mortification was so great that when he approached me to speak about some elven ruins he wished to explore that I could not meet his gaze. Our discussion, such as it was, was stilted and short. His voice was kind, however, and I am thankful for that. But I do miss the friend I’d only just found in him.

.x.

“My apologies,” Solas said. “I had not realized that you were known by another name.”

Boone felt as though the world had broken asunder, was almost certain that if she took one step backward she would teeter on the brink before plummeting away. She’d spent ten years trying to distance herself from everything Solas had set into motion, spent ten years watching as Thedas was caught in the tendrils of turmoil yet again due to his actions—and, due to her inaction. But she had never been able to forget the Solas he’d once been, her advisor, her companion, her friend. And there were other things too she couldn’t forget, regardless of how much she wished she could, recollections she was forced instead to shut away.

And now here he was, seated on a rose gray courser and clad in his fine armor, looking as though time had not touched him at all over the years. And there she was, clad in her simple long shift with her hair hair still wet from bathing, without any kind of armor to speak of against the powerful weapon that was his very presence. She knew the erosions time had wrought upon her were
immediately evident and hated it, hated that he should be the one to come through it all unscathed.

When she spoke, her voice was threaded with bitterness. “It’s the only name I go by now.”

“I see.” He had not looked away from her and she found herself wishing desperately that he would, pinioned as she was by his gaze. He wore no expression, gave away no indication as to what he was thinking and she hated it. She wanted him to feel as she did—naked, defenseless, utterly vulnerable.

“It is good to see you,” he said then. “I’m glad to find you well.”

Her mouth twisted at the pleasantries. “Is it? Are you? But then, you already knew I was well, didn’t you? She must have told you.”

His only response was to tilt his head slightly to the side. She had the feeling he was measuring what he would say next, attempting to find words that would defuse the tension hanging thick in the air. She wasn’t about to give him that chance.

“You’ve a reason for being here?” Her question was clipped, curt.

“I do.” He nodded and dismounted. He slowly approached Boone, his horse standing placidly where he’d left it. Each step he took was measured, almost hesitant, as if he half-believed she’d turn and run headlong from him. And Maker, but she wanted to. Not out fear, no. She’d never feared him, not even in the Crossroads when he’d revealed his true self. She wanted to run from him because of what memories he brought to mind—she’d been his tool, his puppet. Since that day at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, her life as she’d known it had been overwritten entirely by the fact that he’d given Corypheus the orb. And he was a reminder too of her greatest failure—when the world had stood at a devastating threshold, when Fen’Harel had raised his head once more and howled his defiance at the ravages of Time, the one woman who may have stood a chance at defeating him had instead chosen to fade away, to become a ghost, to condemn them all.

It was for this reason more than any others that she hated seeing him here before her.

As he neared she spied what he held in his left hand. It was her journal, the one his agent had taken that night after the ambush, the one she’d kept during her time as Inquisitor. Recalling just what was written in its pages brought a furious flush to her face because she knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that he’d read it all. Every confession she’d had, every secret, every realization that had only ever belonged to her, should have only ever belonged to her, was now his as well.

“I would return this,” he said, drawing to a halt before her. He held out the book.

She snatched it from him immediately, asking in the coldest tone she could muster, “I trust you enjoyed it?”

Instead of answering, he averted his gaze. It was a graceful admission to her accusation. She scowled.

“You must understand,” he said, his eyes focused on the ground between them, “that the entire world thought you dead. When my agent brought me word that she’d encountered you, when she presented me with that book, I had to be certain she was correct. I had to know.”

“You already knew.” Her voice was hard, her gaze flinty. “I was a threat to you once and you are not a man who suffers threats. You would have kept yourself informed about me, about my whereabouts. You’ve known all along I was alive.”

“Yes. For a time.” He moved his eyes back to hers. This close she could see clearly their color, gray-
blue and piercing and overwhelmingly familiar. Everything about him—his appearance, his eyes, his voice—it pained her, assailed her with memories better left forgotten. He continued, “At first, in the months after you disbanded the Inquisition, I knew where you were. But eventually it seemed you’d vanished and there were other matters that demanded my attention.”

“The war with the Evanuris,” Boone said flatly.

He nodded once.

The war I could have prevented. That thought strayed in from the shadowed fringes of her mind, wounding her. She disguised the wince, squaring her jaw stubbornly. “You’ve ascertained I’m alive. You’ve returned my journal. There’s nothing else here for you, so be on your way.”

She turned from him then, striding as quickly as she could without breaking into a run back through the gate. Let this be the end of it, she prayed as she walked. Let him leave.

But his voice ghosted after her. “Evelyn.”

There was such intrinsic authority in that one word, an undeniable influence, his by right of his immortal birth, by right of millenia lived. She’d never heard him speak that way before. It startled her. She halted, wide eyed, wondering with more than a little panic if the compulsion she felt then was some kind of sorcery. She turned to face him again, reluctance weighing the movement. He had followed her into the compound. Behind him ambled his mount, head down, nipping at grass as it walked.

She said so softly it was almost a whisper, “There is nothing for you here, Solas.”

“There is you,” he replied.

“And I am nothing. Look at me. I have no longer have any power. I am missing an arm, can no longer wield a bow. If you thought I could somehow be of further use to you, you were wrong. Please, just leave.”

She watched his expression harden somewhat at her deliberate choice of words but was beyond caring. What she wanted more than anything in this moment was for him to mount his horse, direct it north, and ride back out of her life. He made no indication of doing so, however, and she found herself suddenly seized by anger. “Have you come to ensure I was no longer a threat? Perhaps to reassure yourself that you no longer have any enemies left to challenge you?”

The lines of his face deepened with frustration and he took a step toward her, one hand outstretched in a manner meant to be placating. “You were never my enemy—”

“No,” she interrupted, “but I was never really your friend, either.”

His frown deepened. “Evelyn—”

“Boone!” she snapped. “My name is Boone. Evelyn died long ago.”

“And yet,” he said in a soft voice tinged with something strange, something indecipherable, “here she stands before me.”

“Why have you come?” Her demand rang forth as a shout, under siege as she was from emotions both tangled and ragged. “Why are you really here? Have you come to show me mercy? Have you come to tell me that you wish to destroy the world a third time?”
Her verbal salvo struck a nerve. He winced, glancing sharply away, hands clenching into fists at his side. A rush of vindictive satisfaction filled her, knowing she could at least wound him this way. She whirled around again, determined to leave him behind, only to find Movda standing some several feet away with one hand fisted over her mouth, her gaze fastened over Boone’s shoulder on the elven man that stood there.

“It’s all right,” Boone assured the older woman. “He was just about to take his leave.”

“I was not,” Solas said behind her. He strode forward, stopping at Boone’s side. “I apologize,” he said to Movda, inclining his head respectfully, “I did not realize Evelyn had a visitor.”

Boone expelled her breath in a huff of pure ire. “It’s her farm.”

“Ah.” He took a step forward before bowing politely to Movda. “In that case, you have my apologies for intruding. Unfortunately, it is imperative that I speak with Evelyn further.”

Movda’s astonishment had faded quickly. Arms folded over her chest, she regarded Solas now out of narrowed, speculative eyes. “But does she want to speak with you, I wonder?”

Solas straightened, glancing over his shoulder at Boone, clearly taken aback by the older woman’s directness. It was readily apparent she knew exactly who he was. Movda was looking at Boone too, awaiting her answer.

“I don’t,” she said, “but I fear I must, if only to get him to leave.”

Movda stared at her for a long moment, measuring. Finally she nodded once, lips compressing into a thin line. She turned and made her way back to the house, but didn’t go inside. Instead she situated herself at the threshold, sinking down to sit with her legs tucked beneath her. Solas watched her depart before facing Boone again.

She wasted no time. “If not to return my book, why are you truly here?”

“My agent told me of the other books you carried, of what was contained within them—accounts of those who have suffered over the years.”

“Suffered because of what you’d done.” And, unsaid: Suffered because of what I hadn’t done.

She watched the muscles in his jaw tighten in anger. It was a moment before he spoke again and when he did his words were taut, controlled. “How many stories did you collect? How many of those books are there?”

“Hundreds. There are hundreds of stories, nearly as many books.”

“You have been collecting them for a very long time.”

“Since that day.”

A silence fell, intensifying the schism between them and they regarded each other through it, gazes weighted by grim memories, by sorrow, by regret. He asked finally, “Why?”

She thought on that question, lowering her eyes. Moments passed. She shook her head finally, the answer being too convoluted, too personal, too damning to share. Perhaps sensing this, Solas said then, “I wish to read them, if you would permit it.”

Her eyes snapped back to his. “Why? What possible reason could you have for wanting to read
them?” Before he could even begin to reply she continued, shaking her head. “No. You cannot read
them. You are the reason for their suffering, the reasons for their loss. I will not betray those people
by giving their stories to you!”

Her voice had risen again, propelled by her anger. Her rage was forked, focused not only on the
even man before her but also aimed directly at herself. The truth was there, easy for anyone to see:
while Solas was responsible for the Sundering, so too was she. She had been the Inquisitor, leader of
one of the most powerful forces in Thedas, a figurehead for justice, a protector of the downtrodden
and oppressed. Instead of combating Solas, instead of attempting to prevent what she had known he
intended, she had chosen instead to disappear. The suffering of the people whose stories she had
collected was as much her doing as it was his, but here in this moment, face to face with him again,
al she could feel was unmitigated fury at what he’d done not only to the world, but to her.

She was nearly made dizzy by the strength of her rage. She surged on, words falling from her lips
heated and rapid. “There is nobody in this world free from your manipulations. There is nobody in
this world that has not known strife because of what you’ve done. Your arrogance, your ignorance—
look around you! What have they wrought?”

She took a step forward, caught completely in the grip of a fury so old and so caged that, now freed,
it overrode every other impulse she had. “You used me. You made me your puppet, directed me to
fix the first wound you’d inflicted upon the world through poor judgment. Because of you I lost the
life I’d had before the Breach. I lost my arm. I lost—”

But she caught herself before spilling that last secret, forcibly swallowing the words. She was
breathing fast, the fingers of her only hand curled tightly shut. When she could speak again her
words were quiet but venomous. “How could you think I would want anything to do with you
again? How could you think that anything could mend this wound? You may be immortal,
Fen’Harel, and powerful, but you are also remarkably ignorant in so many ways.”

He’d endured her outburst stone-faced, his eyes never leaving her face. She stepped back, suddenly
realizing how close she stood, and with a hand that trembled from the aftershock of her lividity she
pushed damp strands of her hair back behind her shoulders.

He said, “I seek absolution.”

She laughed. It startled her, the sound both wild and haggard. She felt a sudden prickling behind her
eyes, heralding tears. It was too much, the sadness and the guilt and the anger. It was too much, his
voice and his face and his words. And it was too much that he would seek absolution from the
woman who was just as culpable for the state of the world as he was.

“So do I,” she told him, swallowing hard against the knot in her throat, “in every story I search out,
in every word that I write. I have not found it. I never will. Neither will you.”

“Evelyn,” he said softly, sadly, “I used you most cruelly, I know this. I have been a fool, yes, in
more ways than one. And I have been a liar, too. But in this I speak only the truth: your forgiveness
is what I seek. It is why I am here. I would make amends for what I did to you, for encouraging you
to do what I needed you to do all those years ago.”

“Evelyn no longer exists. I am—”

“Boone, yes. But that is the name of a ghost, a fragment of a woman I once knew.”

“This is all I am now, Solas!”
“I disagree,” he said calmly in the face of her resurfacing wrath, as he had so many times in the past when urging her to discretion, to contemplation, to caution. It reminded her so strongly of the way things had once been that she had to close her eyes hard to prevent the tears from escaping.

“You are very good,” she told him thickly, eyes still closed, “at disagreeing with me. You always have been.”

“Yes,” he responded, and she could picture the small smile that would be pulling at the corners of his mouth in reaction to her words. She opened her eyes again to see that what she’d envisioned was real, that he was smiling and she was gripped with the sudden urge to reach out to him, to feel his arm beneath her hand—

Behind her, Movda’s voice rang out in the most unceremonious bellow she could muster, “Would his royal lordship care for a cup of tea?”

Despite herself, despite everything, Boone felt her lips twitch. Movda had learned a great deal about Solas over the years.

“Thank you, no,” Solas called out in polite reply.

The interruption had been timely indeed and just what Boone needed to regain some modicum of control over her emotions. Breathing deep, she took another step away from Solas, seeking clarity in distance. He watched the movement and she saw that he understood what she was doing, understood that her veneer—such as it was, tarnished and worn—was securely back in place.

“I will go,” he said, and her sigh of relief was clearly audible. He went on, “I have diplomatic matters to attend to nearby that I can not delay any longer. But—I will be returning, Evelyn. We will conclude this. Everything I have said to you I have meant. I would make my amends to you. I would regain your trust, however long it may take.”

“No. Don’t bother returning, please. Solas, we are not who we used to be. We can never be that way again. There is nothing here for you.”

But he would not acknowledge what she said. He was silent, eyes intent upon her face. He moved then, reaching toward her with one hand, but he swiftly checked the movement. “Until next we speak,” he said before turning and walking to his horse.

She watched, equal parts numb and ragged, as he mounted and raised a hand in farewell to both her and Movda, watched as he reined his horse around and rode smoothly out of the gate. She heard footsteps approaching from behind her and when Movda placed her hand on Boone’s shoulder, Boone lifted her own hand to cover it.

“He’ll come back,” she said. “I must leave again.”

And Movda sighed. “I know.”

.x.
The solution not sought

In the semi-dark before dawn, Boone moved quickly, saddling her mare and tying down her packs. Movda stood at the gate to the stable, watching in silence. Boone’s every action was swift, jerky, her panic translating clearly through movement. Neither of them had slept; instead they’d spent the night sitting at the table in the kitchen, not speaking, lost in their own grim thoughts. There was nothing that could be said—Solas was an unstoppable force, something he’d proved to the world more than once. There existed no earthly force that could stand in his way, and pretending that she—without an arm, without the Anchor, without any claim to power whatsoever—could stand against him now was a harmful, deadly fabrication.

And so she was going to run.

When the mare was ready, when her hastily assembled baggage was all secure, Boone turned to Movda. There were tears in her eyes, brimming and ready to spill over. The events of the past week had turned her life, such as it was, completely upside down. She’d been secure in her anonymity for so long, had been content to let Evelyn Trevelyan rest with all the other ghosts that haunted Thedas. The resurrection of her old self—unwanted, unexpected—had brought to life fears and regrets greater than any she’d ever had, even as the Inquisitor.

She and Movda regarded each other without speaking for a long span of moments. The old woman’s eyes were brimming too, and finally she shook her head with a sound of frustration before stepping forward to engulf Boone in an embrace.

“I could go with you,” she said in a voice made thick by emotion.

“This is your home,” Boone replied as she hugged Movda tightly.

“And what if—” here the older woman’s voice broke, her hands fisting against Boone’s back. “What if he follows?”

“Of course he will. But I’ll keep running. I’ve had years of experience.” Boone let her arm fall and stepped back. The brief smile she gave her friend was meant to be reassuring, but was bleak and faltering instead. She lost the battle to contain her tears, then, and as one slipped down her cheek, she hastily turned back to the mare, clearing her throat as she did so.

“Perhaps he spoke the truth.” Movda said behind her, one last attempt at dissuasion.

“No.” There was such harsh certainty in that one word. Boone began to lead the mare from the stable. Movda stepped aside to let her pass, but trailed a short distance behind.

“And what of Thom?” Movda asked as exited the stable.

Boone’s smile was grim as, with reins in hand, she reached up to grab the saddle’s pommel. Sliding one foot into the stirrup, she replied, “He’ll finally get his wish. I’ll find him in the Free Marches.”

“Good.” Movda watched as Boone easily mounted the mare. She stepped forward, placing her hand on Boone’s leg, looking up at her friend. “Ride fast,” she said, “and be safe. Please.”

Her voice cracked on the last word and she reflexively looked away, to hide her own sorrow, to hide her own fear. Boone loved her fiercely in that moment, this woman who had lost everything, who had continued to live despite that, who had welcome Boone into her life as she would have a daughter of her own blood.
“I’ll get word to you somehow, once I find Thom.” Beneath her the mare fidgeted, sensing her rising agitation. Despite her extreme reluctance to leave, Boone could feel a steady, insistent dread settle itself over her shoulders, a shawl woven from threads of doubt and anxiety. Every second she delayed was time in favor of Solas. “It shouldn’t take me long to find him, but I must go now.”

“Yes.” Emotions under control once more, Movda looked back to Boone. “Go. I’ll be waiting.”

They exchanged smiles, strained and brief, and then Boone nudged her horse into motion. Rattling the bit in her mouth, the mare obliged, shooting forward with eager, clipped strides. As they passed Movda, Boone felt the older woman’s hand graze her leg, one last comforting touch. Swallowing hard, she continued urging her mount forward.

With a swift trot they cleared the yard. As they crossed through the gate the mare attempted to break into a canter but Boone held her back, turning in the saddle to look back at the farm, back at Movda. It wasn’t yet dawn, the world still shadows cast upon shadows, but the figure of Movda standing tall in the middle of the yard was clear. The old woman raised her hand in slow farewell. Boone turned back around. Beneath her the mare snorted, pulling at the bit and tossing her head. Nudging with her heels, Boone reined her around and directed her onward.

She heard it just as the mare took her first step. It was faint, nearly inaudible, but she heard it all the same. Though it had been long years she knew the sound instantly for what it was, knew it because it was the familiar sound of a taut bowstring being released, of an arrow being let fly. Pain immediately followed that sound—her left shoulder was suddenly ablaze in agony, flaring waves jolting up and down what remained of her arm. Her scream caught in her throat, choking her. She knew what had happened, knew that there was an arrow buried now in the back of her shoulder. But—

*How? Why?*

She’d managed to stay astride her horse but had reflexively yanked hard on the reins. The mare stumbled backward, pivoting on her hindquarters. Boone could see them now, four figures in the gray light of early dawn, stepping forth from behind the large trees that encircled the compound. She struggled with her one hand to turn the terrified mare around, kicking her hard in the sides, but the animal was beyond reason. The attackers were approaching quickly, steadily—

Blinding light erupted as fire suddenly enveloped the first of the attackers. The second, on the heels of the first, was consumed in a pillar of fire as well. Boone understood what was happening immediately, had seen it happen enough during her time as Inquisitor to know.

Solas had set wards around the compound.

The third attacker was so startled by the sudden conflagrations that he stumbled in the wrong direction, toward the compound. He too went up in flames, shrieking. That horrific sound was enough to break what fragile control Boone still held over the mare. The horse reared and bucked before bolting sideways, and finally her rider was unseated. Boone twisted as best she could as she fell, able to faintly dredge up muscle memory and instinct that had belonged to the Inquisitor, to the woman she’d once been. She hit the ground hard on her right side but managed to keep from rolling over completely, terrified as she was of forcing the arrow deeper into her flesh. She heard, over the roar of her own panicked pulse, the frenzied, fleeing hoofbeats of her horse, the eerie crackling of the magefire consuming her attackers, the screams of the men as they died.

She managed to prop herself up on her elbow, lifting her head. From the corner of her eye she saw the fourth attacker backing steadily away from the three infernos that had been his comrades. He had not dropped his bow. Twisting her head back around, choking on a pained sob, she saw Movda racing across the compound toward her. Her arm gave way and she dropped heavily to the ground,
the grass cool and damp beneath her cheek. Her right hand crawled toward Movda, toward comfort, toward home—

“Boone!” Movda was on her knees beside her, hands probing delicately at the shaft of the arrow. That one gentle touch elicited an agonized moan from Boone. With Movda’s help she managed to roll onto her right side, half-craddled in the older woman’s lap. With a hand that shook violently, she reached up to touch the arrow buried in her shoulder, craning her head as far as she could to see. It was a delicate thing, thin and deadly. The fletching was gracefully shaped and Boone could see, by the first tenuous rays of the morning’s light, that the feathers were colored, silvery-white threaded with lines of brown and green. She recognized the fletching’s design, as she’d been forced to recognize so many other things recently.

It was Elvhen.

She forced that realization aside, pushed the damning implications away in order to focus on staying alive. “There’s another man,” she panted, each word stilted with pain. She clutched at the collar of Movda’s dress. “Another man with a bow!”

“I know.” Movda replied tersely. “I need to move you, Boone.”

Boone nodded, swallowing hard against a knot of nausea and panic. Movda stood, gripping Boone under her arms, trying not to jostle the arrow. She began dragging her friend back into the compound. Boone tried to help, pushing with her legs, but each step Movda took jarred the wound and the resulting agony had her hissing between clenched teeth. They cleared the gate. Movda hauled her several more feet before she stumbled, letting go of Boone in order to catch herself. Boone hit the ground once more, the arrow piercing deeper. Her scream was strangled and abrupt.

And then, mercifully, the world went white.

.x.

14 Cloudreach
9:41 Dragon

I have come the closest to death I ever wish to be.

I’ve been in this bed for six days. I’m told I won’t be leaving it for at least another six. For the eleven days before that the Inquisition had been exploring the Western Approach. It is a place I quickly came to hate, an unforgiving desert rife with threats so numerous that I’m still not certain I understand them all. But in the midst of the sand and the harsh winds and the cruel sun there lay answers we needed and so we continued on, pushing back against whatever dangers we found.

I made a mistake. That’s how I came to be injured. Prolific in the Approach are raiders known as White Claws. They are fierce and deadly, mixing brawn with stealth and the further we advanced into the desert, the more of them there were. Six days ago, Cassandra, Sera, Solas and I came across a sizeable White Claw patrol. We attacked as we had to but as we fought a quillback joined the fray. I lost track of the rogue I’d been focusing, choosing instead to gain some distance from the battle so I could unleash a barrage of arrows. And as I ventured away alone, so foolish, so stupid, the rogue found me again, this time to slip a poisoned knife between my ribs.

We tussled, the rogue and I, and an arrow I hadn’t let fly I rammed into his throat. He died choking on his own blood, his eyes fixed upon mine. I left the knife where it was, afraid to remove it, already feeling the swift spread of numbness and cold. My companions had defeated the others, and as I staggered back toward them it was Sera that realized what had happened to me. Her wordless cry
caught the attention of Solas and Cassandra, and all three raced to my side. “Poison,” I said, gesturing to the knife buried hilt-deep in my side, and at that moment my legs gave way.

I began to lose time after that. I remember it was Cassandra that half-carried, half-dragged me beneath a stone overhang that offered meager shelter from the merciless heat of the day. It was Sera who gripped my chin, muttering indecipherable obscenities as she held a small bottle of something truly vile tasting to my lips and ordered me to drink it. And it was Solas who watched over me as the other two departed, returning to the nearest Inquisition camp in order to seek aid.

It took them hours. We had ventured farther into the Approach than ever before. During that time it was as if I slept off and on, though Solas says I did not. Reality drifted from me, leaving me oblivious to everything, but every time I became aware again he was there at my side.

“I’m very cold,” I remember telling him at one point. My voice to my own ears sounded strange—calm, dreamy, unconcerned. “I’m cold, but I know I shouldn’t be.”

“It’s the poison,” Solas told me. He was kneeling before me. He lifted my hand with his own, feeling at my pulse, feeling at the coolness. He covered it with both of his then, as though to warm it. I remember smiling at the futility of his gesture—my entire body was cold, not just my hand.

“I may die here,” I continued conversationally. It was odd; I was very aware of how dire the situation was, but it seemed not to matter as much as I knew it should.

“You will not die here.”

I recall the way his voice sounded with that statement: terse, grave. His eyes moved upward until they found my own. It struck me then, as I dreamily studied the pinched lines of his face and the compression of his mouth, that he was panicking in his own specific way.

“I might,” I insisted, feeling even in the grips of the poison the urge to be mulish. Ever since we’d shared that damned dream, things between he and I had been … off. Our discussions, once friendly, lengthy and often educational, had become short and often combative. It was my fault, I know. I was blaming him for the kiss that should never have happened. I was still ashamed of what I’d done and I wanted him to suffer for it.

I remember feeling a surge of regret as I read the stark concern evident in his expression. “I’m sorry,” I told him then. He frowned, confused at the way I was erratically drifting from subject to subject. “For the way I’ve been with you,” I elaborated. I lifted the hand he wasn’t holding and fluttered it in the air. “For always wanting to argue. I know I shouldn’t. I’m sorry. It’s because I kissed you. Maker knows I wish I hadn’t now.”

His head snapped back, his eyes widening, as though I’d caught him completely off guard. Looking back on it, I realize I had. He inhaled deeply, glancing away, and while most of my body was at this point completely numb I was certain I could feel him gently squeezing my hand.

“I am sorry,” I said again.

He looked back at me. “I know,” he said softly.

I felt relieved, then, having said what I’d been so afraid to say for so long. I leaned my head back against the rock. “I’m cold. And I’m tired. Solas, I need to sleep.”

He leaned forward, lifting his hands to my face. “No, lethallan, you cannot sleep. You must not. Please.”
It was becoming difficult to focus, so much effort required to keep my eyes open. His palms pressed against my cheeks, he shook his head. “Inquisitor,” he commanded, “stay awake.”

But I couldn’t. And my eyes fell shut, and in that moment all I wanted was to drift away. I was jolted awake by a sensation unlike anything I’d felt before, a rush of power that danced over me like electricity. I gasped, eyes flying open, to find Solas’ face only mere inches from my own, his eyes narrowed and fixed upon me with focused intent. A faint, swirling green aura had encompassed his entire body.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Energy,” he said. His voice was taut, mirrored in the tension I felt in his hands still cupping my face.

His intention had been to keep me awake and it had worked. But already I felt the heavy weariness creeping back, beckoning me to oblivion. “How long can you do that for?”

His expression was grim. “As long as I must.”

And so it was. Every time I succumbed to exhaustion he jolted me back to awareness. For how long we remained thus, me seated, he kneeling before me, my face cradled in his hands, I don’t know. What I do know is that eventually awareness left me completely, and when I awoke again I was here, in my bed, back in Skyhold.

It terrifies me how close I came to death. Danger is an inherent part of owning the Anchor. I knew this. I knew it would only be a matter of time before I was wounded somehow. Now that it’s happened, however, I find myself awash in new fears and new worries. I am afraid of dying. I desperately want to live. I’m afraid that my death, if it should come to that, will doom all of Thedas, for what hope is there without the Anchor to combat the Breach?

And I’m afraid because of what I feel for Solas. It hasn’t ebbed. It hasn’t disappeared. It is still there, ever lurking, and I cannot overcome it. I know it for what it is: infatuation, the foolish curse of youth. But will it cloud my judgement? Has it already? Will it hinder the choices I make from now on? It’s within my power to send him away, to banish him from the Inquisition, but we need him. His knowledge and his skills are an asset we cannot afford to lose.

I know I must try to forget what I feel and focus on the many tasks at hand, but now, in this moment, lying as an invalid in this bed, I cannot. I cannot forget his touch as he sought to save my life. I cannot forget the intensity in his voice and the concern in his eyes. And I cannot forget that if not for him, I would by now most certainly be dead.

.x.

She felt gentle fingers at her brow, brushing back stray strands of hair. A chorus of voices had risen nearby, mingled together, rousing her with their volume. From among those voices she heard a cadence that was comfortingly familiar, and blindly she turned her head toward it.

“Boone,” said the voice again. She opened her eyes with a slow inhale to find Movda kneeling at her side, leaning over her. Her wrinkled face bore additional creases of worry. Boone was lying on her stomach, and moving slowly she attempted to prop herself up on her elbow. Despite her caution the movement pulled at the wound in her shoulder. She dropped back to the ground with a muffled whimper, her forehead pressed against the grass.

“I will remove the arrow, Evelyn, but you must keep as still as you can.”
Solas. Of course it would be. She turned her head enough to be able to look upward, to see him standing beside Movda. He dropped to a crouch, regarding her with an expression of grave concern. It reminded her so strongly of another time and another place that her breath betrayed her, catching in her throat.

*Not that memory, nor the others, don't!*—

She closed her eyes and focused on keeping her breathing even and deep, on the air flowing into her lungs, on the smell of the damp earth and the blades of grass pressed feather-soft beneath her cheek. The sounds that had brought her back to awareness still persisted, other voices beyond those of Movda and Solas. She opened her eyes again and saw that there were armed men gathered in a loose group some several feet away. Their armor was similar to that of Solas’ and she understood immediately that these were his forces that had accompanied him. Had they found the last archer? Were there other attackers she hadn’t seen?

Those were questions for later. There were other dire, prominent thoughts on her mind. “You set wards,” she said, her voice thready with pain as her gaze slid sideways to focus upon him again.

He inclined his head, but it was a moment before he spoke. “I had reason to suspect this.”

“To suspect an attack on a cripple and an old woman?” Boone’s smile, such as she could muster, was nothing more than a bitter twist of the lips.

He chose to ignore her, instead asking Movda, “May I?” The older woman’s eyes narrowed with distrust and it was a long moment before she shuffled over, allowing him to get closer to Boone.

She stiffened as she felt his touch, hands pressing gently both above and below the arrow lodged in her flesh. She hunched her shoulders, turning her head so that her forehead was pressed against the ground again, willing herself not to whimper as the pressure of his fingers caused ripples of pain to radiate outward.

“I’ll have to cut through your clothing in order to dress the wound,” he said. She didn’t respond, was unable to, biting her lip hard to suppress any sound that would betray her suffering. Solas addressed one of his soldiers in elven, issuing a short order. She heard footsteps approaching, more words spoken, and then it was Movda’s voice that spoke next.

“Boone, we’re going to begin.”

She swallowed, nodding her head once in mute acknowledgement.

Working in tandem, Movda and Solas proceeded as gently as they could, but every time they touched her it felt as though the arrow was sinking further into her shoulder. She lay rigid, every muscle taut with agony as together the old woman and the Elvhen man cut away the layers of her roughspun shirt and smallclothes until the wound was laid bare.

“Breathe, Boone.” Movda’s voice was directly beside her ear, her hand reassuringly stroking the back of Boone’s head. Boone tried to comply, relaxing her abdomen enough to suck in a deep gulp of air. One breath, then two, and then three, and the pain settled into a duller ache. Fingers brushed against her bare skin and she abruptly started, knowing it was Solas’ touch she felt.

And then it was his voice at her ear, his breath fanning errant strands of her hair. “I can ease the pain somewhat, but you must not move.”

*Do it, damn you!* she wanted to shout. But she said nothing, instead exhaling a sound that somehow managed to sound acquiescent.
Instantly, a cold numbness began to spread from the point of contact between Solas’ hands and her skin. It was a merciful sensation, immediately soothing the pain. She felt her body relax in response. She could no longer tell if he was touching her and no longer cared, so grateful was she to be hurting less.

“Take a deep breath,” Solas murmured above her. “Release it slowly.”

She did as directed. And then, even through the arcane numbness, she felt the sensation of Solas slowly and carefully removing the arrow from her body. It was agonizing; her hand scrabbled at the grass as one of her legs spasmed and kicked out. She bit down so hard on her lip that the metallic tang of blood flooded her mouth.

“It’s done,” he said then, and her breath left her in a thankful sob.

She lay prone as Solas and Movda finished the task, dressing the wound with whatever supplies they’d somehow managed to find. Boone turned her head, bit by bit, until she could see them both kneeling over her. They worked in silence, but it was obvious in Movda’s hunched posture that she was both uncomfortable and anxious.

When they’d finished dressing the wound, Movda tied the remnants of Boone’s smallclothes together, rendering them temporarily serviceable. “Do you want to sit up?” the older woman asked. Boone nodded, and with Movda’s support, managed very slowly to do so. Her eyes were watering by the time she was upright, and she swiftly wiped at them with the back of her hand. Movement caught her attention; to her left Solas was getting to his feet. In his hand he held the arrow, the point coated in her blood.

“That fletching is Elvhen,” she said, striving to keep her voice steady.

He didn’t look at her, instead staring down at what he held. “Yes,” he finally said.

“You people attacked me.”

“No.” He shook his head, looking at her. “Not my people.”

“Explain the arrow, then,” Movda demanded.

Solas had turned his head and was gazing across the compound, toward the gate. His expression had altered; even though it had been long years, Boone was familiar enough with his personality to know the countenance he now bore. It was one of mingled fury and profound disappointment. Realization struck her as a bolt of lightning might, the reason for the expression he bore. The haphazard, random pieces of the violent puzzle that this day had become fell into place. She’d been attacked by the Elvhen, but they had not done so at Solas’ request. And he’d said he’d expected this …

“So the Elvhen are not so united, after all,” she said.

He’d heard her, turning his head to look down at her where she sat. And she saw in his eyes a grim light that affirmed what she’d just said. She opened her mouth to ask, what have you done? Voices calling out to Solas from across the compound stopped her. She and Movda watched as three armed Elvhen men approached and spoke at length with Solas. Though she didn’t understand, Boone could guess what they were relaying to their leader based on the expressions on their faces: they hadn’t found the last attacker.

Solas dismissed his men and returned his attention to Movda and Boone. “You cannot remain here, Evelyn. Now that they know where you are, they will send others.”
"And what of Movda? I won’t leave her here alone."

“She won’t be alone. I am leaving some men behind.”

“I don’t need your guards,” Movda said sharply.

“Forgive me, but you do.” Solas’ voice had altered and had become clipped and commanding. “Though I don’t think you are in any danger. It’s Evelyn they wish dead and if she’s not here, they’ll have no reason to return.”

Boone determinedly decided to ignore what he was saying. “Did your men find my horse?” she asked instead, slowly managing to stand with a large amount of assistance from Movda. “I’d been about to leave just as I was attacked.”

At her side, with one arm wrapped around her waist to offer support, Movda made a sound of utter incredulity. “You cannot still think to travel alone, wounded like this!”

Boone took a tentative step forward and found that her legs wobbled like that of a newborn foal. Movda’s arm tightened at her waist. “And you know I can’t remain,” she replied firmly, taking another unsteady step.

“You’re coming with me,” Solas said.

Both Boone and Movda stared at him in stunned disbelief. “No.” Boone said after several moments of silence had ticked past.

“There is no other option.”

“There are many other options, all of them preferable to that one!”

“Ev—” Solas stopped himself, seeing the way she scowled. He took a deep breath and continued, “I offer you my protection. I will keep you from harm, but you must trust me.”

“I would rather take my chances anywhere else, with anyone else!” she snapped.

“You are being foolish!” Solas’ own ire had risen to the fore, his sharp words carrying clearly across the compound. Boone noted from the corner of her eye that some of the gathered Elvhen soldiers had turned to watch the heated exchange.

“Have you forgotten who we are, Solas? Or rather, who we were?” She raised the stump that had once been her left arm. “Inquisitor and Fen’Harel. Never friends, only enemies, but that was a secret I was not made privy to until the bloody fucking end. I haven’t forgotten, couldn’t forget no matter how hard I tried, not the way you have. And now I’ve been attacked by a member of your glorious reborn Elvhen nation, and you think I’ll follow you willingly?”

Her voice had risen with every word, harsh and strident. As he had before, he endured her outburst in silence, his face so set as to be carved from stone. They regarded each other, both motionless, the air between them almost alight with the tangible motes of her hostility.

“Perhaps not willingly,” he said.

She knew fear in that moment, an unwelcome addition to the gamut of unpleasant emotions she was already experiencing. As he began to approach she backed away, his steps determined, hers faltering. Movda inserted herself into his path, catching at his shoulders. A shouted order brought two of his soldiers running over, and Boone watched in disbelieving fury as they seized Movda by the arms and
pulled her aside.

Solas resumed his advance. Boone made a wordless sound of frustration, of helplessness, because he would get his way. She held out her hand as though she could stop him through force of will alone. “Solas, stop!”

But he didn’t. He closed the gap between them with four swift steps. One-armed, weakened from her wound, she tried to shove him away and failed. And then his hands were cradling her face, capturing her, his face so close to her own that she could feel his exhalations brushing her lips. She was rendered immobile, struck mute, riveted in that moment by a rush of memory so strong that she could only give way before it. For a span of suspended heartbeats she was back in the sands of the Western Approach, seated beneath an overhang of rock, her life slipping away as Solas frantically sought to save it.

“Leave me here,” she whispered, the present abruptly reasserting itself. Movda, several feet away, was pulling against the grip of the soldiers, desperately calling Boone’s name.

“Stop fighting me. Please.” His voice was equally as soft. She was pinioned by his gaze, by those pale eyes that were so disconcerting, both familiar and unknown. “I want to protect you, but this is the only way I can do so.”

“Protect me from your people?”

His jaw tightened. “They are not mine.”

Boone realized she was shaking, the fine tremors racing through her hands, her shoulders. She ached for the life she’d known only days past, the life in which she was merely a woman unknown, the life in which she had forced all memories of this man and all he’d done into submission and exile. He felt her trembling and she watched as the set of his face softened. “I would never hurt you,” he said, and she heard the strains of sorrow and regret in his voice. It nearly undid her, unraveled what flimsy, insignificant defenses she had left.

But she tried to rally herself one last time. “You already have.”

Her voice wavered, from pain, from panic, from fear. She reached up and caught his wrist with her hand, intent on pulling it away though she knew with certainty that she lacked the strength.

“Then never again.” He closed his eyes, opened them slowly, lines of reluctance and resignation appearing between his brows. “Sleep, Evelyn.”

He was Fen’Harel, an immortal, a god. Compelled by the intrinsic sorcery in his words, Boone could only obey.

.x.
On either side, flawed and perilous

Boone opened her eyes to a room unfamiliar to her. She blinked once, twice, still breathing in a sleeper’s slow rhythm. She was comfortable, warm and relaxed, completely at peace. On the fringes of her mind was a lingering certainty that this security would not last, that soon the unpleasant tendrils of the world without would intrude. And then, between one exhale and another, her sense of serenity faded as memory flooded in.

She sat up quickly, urgency flaring as she remembered Solas’ voice. Anger bled into that urgency as she recalled his final command and realized that she had been helpless to do anything but obey it. Other recollections tumbled to the forefront of her mind, begging for attention, and seizing the foremost she twisted her head around, reaching with her hand to probe the arrow wound. She was unsurprised to feel no pain, only a little muscle stiffness. She couldn’t see if there were any scarring, but she imagined not. Solas had always been remarkably adept at healing.

Her panic faded, but some of the anger remained. She knew it would always be there, ever-simmering, but she pushed it aside for the moment, instead taking time to survey her surroundings. She had a suspicion as to where she was, and the fact that the large room she was in was seemed to be partially carved from a massive tree trunk confirmed that suspicion. The woodwork was flawless, the walls rounded in perfect symmetry with the tree. The bed, also carved from wood, was situated in the nook of the trunk. There was an open, arched door across the room.

Boone slipped from the bed, her limbs stiff and slow to respond. Her feet were bare, the wooden floor cool beneath them. She was wearing a dress of viridian green, finely woven but unadorned, that gathered below her breasts and fell to her ankles. The sleeves reached just past her elbow, the one on the left hemmed to accommodate her missing limb. She mused on the dress, on the alterations that had been made. Like her anger, it was another thought for another time. She walked slowly to the door and peered out. It led into another, larger room with furniture. She passed through, looking about. Like the other room, this one was partially carved from the trunk of another tree, completed by floors and walls of polished mahogany wood. The ceiling soared, framed on one end by the twisting, reaching branches of the tree. In the center of the tree trunk a fireplace had been carved, augmented by intricate stonework. Boone drifted closer, curious. The carvings that framed the stone of the hearth were small but precise, depicting scenes that she was certain stemmed from ancient Elvhen lore.

Leaving the fireplace, she followed the curve of the wall to another door, peering inside to find an alcove that housed a large cistern, fed water from without by a carved stone spout. There was a tub made of stone opposite the cistern, a large ewer set upon the edge. She walked to the cistern, cupping her hand and dipping it in the water, before ducking her head to wet her face. She wiped the excess water away, blinking as it beaded on her lashes, and stepped back out into the main chamber.

There were large windows on the opposite wall, high and peaked. To the very left there was another archway and as she neared, she realized it led out onto a balcony. She could catch glimpses of what lay waiting without and was suddenly seized by a powerful sense of curiosity. She crossed the room and stepped out onto the balcony, blinking a little as bright sunlight washed over her, stepping up to the railing and grasping it with her hand as her eyes took in the scenery.

Era’Adahlen was beautiful.

Boone knew it would be, of course, knew it could never be anything but. She was still unprepared for the sight though, and as she saw the city laid out before her she caught her breath in awe. The city spanned trees, connected by walkways carved from branches, by bridges made of stone. White
spires rose here and there, augmenting the magnificent foliage of the forest, catching the light as a crystal would and reflecting it. Every structure she could see was carved with astounding skill from a tree, creating the illusion that it had grown that way, into a marvelous piece of architecture that defied nature’s boundaries. The city was not entirely reliant on trees, she realized, leaning over the balcony to get a better glimpse of what lay below. There were buildings on the ground too, scattered between the massive trunks trees, separated by streets of glistening white stone.

The balcony Boone stood upon had to be one of the highest in the city, offering her a clear vantage point and from this height she was amazed by the scope of the city. Ten years ago this had simply been a forest, populated with wildlife and the occasional Chasind clan. And now it was Era’Adahlen, the modern sister city of ancient Arlathan, the capital of the new Elvhenan nation. The world had been sundered in order to create this city, the Veil torn down, the Evanuris conquered a final time, and so many lives lost because of it. And it was achingly, impossibly beautiful. She was besieged by sudden, unwanted tears at the sight of the city that had cost so much.

There was a sound behind her. She whirled. Solas stood at the other end of the balcony, having just stepped outside. He wore the pelt of a wolf again, draped over his shoulder and secured with his belt. Gone was his armor; instead he wore clothing strongly reminiscent of what he wore during his time with the Inquisition, except that it was obvious to Boone’s eyes that these were of high quality and finely made. Seeing him startled her and she hated that, hated that even now, all these years later, he still managed to disarm her simply by appearing.

She said, voice husky from her battle against her tears, “Fen’Harel.”

She hadn’t meant to greet him thus. The word had spilled from her mouth unbidden, and she watched as a frown flickered over his face. Inclining his head, he returned her greeting. “Inquisitor.”

*That* title, from *that* voice—she whipped her head around, unwilling to let him see how one word could hurt so much. Blinking hard, fiercely willing tears not to fall, she struggled to remember how to breathe without it sounding like a sob. She’d lost so much during her transition from Trevelyan to Boone, and whatever pride that remained to her she clung to doggedly, with wearied determination. To lose it now in front of him was to lose ground in a battle that had become far too vital far too soon.

“I didn’t mean to—to insult you,” she said when she believed she had her emotions under control. Her voice betrayed her with a slight tremor. She refused to look at him still, gazing outward at the city. “It’s just that this, all of *this* …”

There it was again, that tremor. She closed her eyes, hand clutching the railing as though it were the only anchor left to her in the world. She heard him approach, one step and then another, and it was all she could do not to physically lean away from him, away from the chaos and sorrow he promised, away too from the guilt, the memories laden with shame that always flooded over her when he was near. He waited as she wrestled with the storm within her, waited until she was capable of pretending that she wasn’t made of glass, that the slightest pressure wouldn’t cause her to break. Finally she could breathe without her throat constricting. She squared her shoulders and half-turned to face him.

He too had been staring out at the city. As she turned his eyes moved to her. “Have you any pain?”

“No,” Her voice was still husky, but steady. “Some stiffness, but no pain. I … thank you. For tending the wound.”

He inclined his head again, a graceful acknowledgment of her words.

“How long?” she asked then.
“A day.”

“Movda?”

“Safe.”

“You’ll protect her?”

“I give you my word.”

She stared at him, at a loss for what next to say because there was just so much to say. He returned her look steadily, utterly composed. Finally she said, “Why couldn’t you have just left us in peace?”

He’d been expecting this. “My enemies have become yours. For this, I am sorry. Now that they know of you, they will never stop trying to get to you. I could not effectively protect you while you were there.”

“You’re the Dread Wolf. You’ve destroyed the world not once, but twice. How could you have any enemies left to challenge you?”

His eyes narrowed at her deliberate choice of words. “It has become complicated.”

“Explain.” Her voice had hardened, allowing her to adopt at least some pretense of resilience. He looked away from her, stepping up to the balcony and resting his elbows upon it. She waited for him to speak but he didn’t. And so she did, filling in the blanks with her suspicions. “After everything you did for this, all of this … the lives lost, the wars waged … when all is said and done the Elvhenan is divided?”

“No,” Solas said, and she heard the first stirrings of frustration creep into his voice. “Not at first. It was only after, once we’d created the city, once the majority of Thedas’ Elvhen had arrived here.”

“What caused this rift?”

“Understand,” he said, turning his head toward her, “that history is so often misinterpreted. You know this. I did what I could to instruct them, to enlighten them about what it was like … then, before I created the Veil, when we were free and one with the very world. And they heeded me, most of them. But the rest … there were other voices competing with mine, just as old and just as powerful.”

“The Evanuris.”

“Yes.” He glanced away. He straightened, gripping the railing tightly. “Everything I’d fought against, every ugly ideal and cruel notion I’d tried to banish with them returned. It wasn’t enough for some, that the Elvhen had been elevated once more, become more than a slave race, more than outcasts. It wasn’t enough in light of what they’d suffered at the hands of the Tevinter or in the alienages. They wanted vengeance. They wanted …”

He trailed off, bowing his head. The slope of his shoulders was taut and she watched the way he swallowed, the way it brought out lines of tension in his neck. “They wanted to rule,” she said softly. “They wanted to be the masters, with humanity as slaves.”

“Not just humanity.” He shook his head. “No, they want total dominion. Every race must be subjugated. They believed what they were told, that the ancient Elvhenan came to power by overpowering all others. They wish to conquer all of Thedas.”
“You told me yourself that the Evanuris made slaves of people,” she reminded him.

“I know.” His voice was low.

“Did you truly think it would be so different this time, Solas? History repeats itself. Not even you can change the nature of people. There will always be malcontents, there will always be cruelty and jealousy and hate—”

“I know this!” He stepped away from the railing, turning toward her, his voice grown heated with anger.

“You set them upon this path!”

“I sought to liberate them, to elevate them—”

“No!” she interrupted, her own wrath wakening, beckoned by his own. That he would still insist he was right after all that had happened infuriated her. “You sought to return the world to the way it had been thousands of years ago. You refused to acknowledge that any lives other than those of the elves mattered! You punished those living in order to resurrect something long dead, something that should have been left dead—”

His expression contorted, a fleeting reveal of his own contrition. “How can you say that, Evelyn, when you would have done the same?”

She was shaking her head. “No! I wouldn’t have because I know that the world heals itself, that what is wronged eventually becomes right. You created the Veil and wounded the world, but it healed itself over time in the only ways it could. That is the pattern of life. You refused to give this age and those that lived in it any regard, instead opting to destroy the world again to revive a civilization that should have stayed dead!”

“I did what I had to!”

“And where did it lead? Nothing happened as you wanted it to! I know this, Solas! I know that destroying the Veil didn’t return immortality to the elves. I know that they are as they’ve ever been for centuries: mortal. Fallible. Flawed. Just like every other race you condemned to the demons when you tore down the fucking Veil!”

She’d gone too far and she knew it. She watched as he balled his hands into fists, his eyes narrowing in cold fury. “And where were you, Inquisitor? Where was mankind’s champion when the Dread Wolf set the world ablaze?”

He couldn’t have wounded her more deeply if he’d slid a dagger into her back. His words staggered her, reopened the box in her mind where she’d suppressed her shame and loathing. Freed, they stampeded, knocking her mentally to her knees.

“I was gone,” she told him, her voice thick and ugly, throttled by her tears. “My master had no more use for me. There was no one left to pull my strings.”

It was as if she’d struck him. He blanched, the fury bleeding from his face to leave it pale and drawn. He regarded through wide eyes, shaken. She was just as shocked, taken aback by how quickly things had escalated between them. She whirled about to face the city again, trying desperately to rediscover the sense of wonder she’d had when first she’d seen it, needing some kind of distraction, any distraction, to soothe nerves that felt raw and perilously exposed.

At her back he said, “Evelyn … Ir abelas.”
She knew enough elven to understand his apology. She ducked her head, fearing more tears. The
animosity they’d just shared had drained her, leaving her void of anything more than doubt. She was
trying to find something to say, anything to say, when she felt the hesitant touch of his fingers on her
shoulder. She twisted away from him, seeking to escape the threat of his very presence. He followed,
relentless, catching her by the upper arms and slowly turning her. She would not look at him; he
cought her chin with his fingers and guided her face around, until his eyes caught hers and snared her
as they had so many times before.

“Forgive me my words?”

“It’s so much more than words,” she whispered, astounding them both by smiling brokenly. It was
an expression of such profound sorrow that Solas’ hand dropped from her face. He took a step back,
remorse and shades of other, unnamed emotions clouding his eyes.

She was so vulnerable in that moment and so she did as she must to harden herself again. She shook
her head. “There’s no need to forgive the truth.” He took a breath, ready to provide a ready rebuttal.
She held up her hand. “No. We’ve dwelt enough on the mistakes we’ve each made. Just … please,
Solas, I need to know. These Elvhen that … disagree with your views — why do I matter to them so
much? The Inquisition has been gone these ten years. I have no influence, lead no army. I’m just …”
struggling and failing to find an adequate description, she fluttered a hand helplessly in the air.

He was still studying her face. He was searching, she was sure, for the remnants of that shattered
smile and all it had conveyed. She wished then that she had better control over her expressions, a
wish she’d harbored her for most of her adult life. It was a long moment before he replied. “Spies, as
I’m sure you remember, are an inevitable part of any organization. I warned you of this once. I’ve
known my council was not entirely my own for some time, but ferreting out those who belong to the
Mien’Harel has proven to be a troublesome task.”

“The Mien’Harel?”

“Yes.” Lips compressing into a thin line, he moved back to the balcony railing, gripping it again with
both hands. “That is what they call themselves, those that scoff at any effort made to create peace
between the Elvhenan and the rest of Thedas. It is a word that refers more to a concept than anything
else, that concept being rebellion.”

“I don’t understand. Solas, you’re … you tore down the Veil. How are you not able to deal with a
handful of troublemakers?”

“More than a handful. Far more. And I am stymied. Every member of the Mien’Harel has ties to
someone within this city. Brothers, fathers, mothers, lovers … were I to begin dealing with them in a
violent manner I would risk losing the support of the people. And,” here he paused, as if what he
was about to say would pain him. Boone suspected it would. “Things are far too tenuous now for
that kind of upheaval. I cannot risk it.”

“So you suffer spies and betrayal?”

He glanced at her, smiling. It was not a pleasant smile. “For now. They will be dealt with in time.”

His voice had taken on a distinct cold edge. She felt relief in that moment that she was not his enemy
—or so she hoped. In a bid to move the conversation forward she said, “Very well. You’ve
explained why I’m here. You haven’t explained why they have they’re so interested in me.”

Instead of answering, he shook his head. “We’ve talked too long about this. Evelyn—”
"Boone."

"Evelyn. I ask that you trust me. All will be dealt with. You can return to your home and to Movda once I’m certain it’s safe for you to do so."

"If you want me to trust you," she said with a scowl, "try calling me by my preferred name."

"Perhaps." He was smiling faintly in the face of her ire, as though suddenly reminded of the woman she'd once been. Her mouth twisted into a bitter knot as she was also reminded of days past. His smile faded.

"You’ve not answered my question, either," she persisted as he turned and began to walk back toward the door. "Why do the Mien’Harel want me dead?"

He didn't reply. She followed him closely, her scowl deepening. She had a suspicion as to why the Elvhen rebels sought her death, and it was a thought she fervently hoped would prove false. "Solas!" she snapped as he continued to ignore her.

He paused by the door, looking back at her. "It would be wise to rest," he told her. "You underwent a great deal."

"Why won’t you answer me?"

He met and held her glare with an air of maddening calm. "It is something I am still puzzling out," he told her eventually.

Boone was certain he was lying.

She followed him back inside. "These are your rooms for the duration of your stay," he said. "Should you require any assistance with anything, that bell there—" he gestured to a small white metal bell she hadn't noticed earlier hanging from the wall near another door, "will summon someone to aid you. Is there anything you need?"

"Yes. Let me go home."

His brows descended in exasperation. "You know I cannot."

"So I’m to be a prisoner here?"

He sighed at her sudden resolve to be as mulish as possible. "Ev—Boone. Please. Can you trust me?"

You know I can’t. The words hung unspoken in the air between them, but she knew he heard them as well as she did. She said, "Give me a reason to."

It was he that looked away, unable to hold her eyes any longer. He couldn't give her a reason, of course, because the history they shared was just too damning. Standing here in this room in his city, she felt a chilling, sharp certainty that his apologies and excuses were all pure fabrication, that the true reason she was here was because she could be of further use to him somehow. It terrified her to even think that after ten years apart—after dedicating the entirety of that time to burying the memories of how he’d manipulated her—that he could and would so easily attempt to do so again. It terrified her, because she knew she couldn’t survive such betrayal a second time. She’d barely survived it the first.

And so she regarded him with eyes made wide by apprehension and distrust. He did not look at her
again, instead opening the door that led from the rooms. He paused, one hand on the doorframe, half-turning his head.

“I will not hurt you. What I do now, I do out of concern for you,” he said by way of farewell.

“I don’t believe you,” she replied. She saw him take a deep breath, watched his shoulders rise with the force of it, and then he was gone, the door slowly closing behind him.

.x.
An unexpected accord

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It seemed as though life for Evelyn in Era’Adhalen would settle into a rhythm, despite her reluctance to be there. It might not be so bad, she knew, if not for the constant threat Solas posed. The way she’d so swiftly unraveled in his presence, the way he was able to breach every fortification she’d put in place over the past ten years—it was too dangerous, too real. She’d shed her identity as Evelyn Trevalyan as a way to cope with the enormity of her final, cataclysmic choice as Inquisitor. Becoming Boone had allowed her to live as freely as she could, beset as she was by the demons born of her own guilt. Being near Solas—being exposed to his voice, his words, his touch—created a dissonance in her sense of self. He caused the distinctions between Boone and Evelyn to waver, flooded her with thoughts and memories better left to the woman she’d once been. Solas’ presence was a threat on more than one level. He not only dredged up long-suppressed emotions she no longer wanted to have—no, he caused such conflict within her that she feared for her very sanity.

To say she was a prisoner within Era’Adahlen was not entirely true. She was permitted to roam wherever she wished, which was made apparent to her the day after her confrontation with Solas. A young Elvhen woman had knocked on the door to her chambers the next morning, nervously presenting herself as Irithala. She was there, she explained in a pleasant, accented voice, to assist Boone in whatever way she may need. Food arrived for breakfast immediately after on a large platter carried by an older Elvhen man. He didn’t speak as he placed the tray on the table that Irithala directed him too, but she could sense his powerful curiosity in the glances he stole in her direction.

Breakfast was fruit, slices of crisp apple and juicy spears of pear, accompanied by bread slathered in thick, pale honey. Despite her ferocious appetite, Boone made an effort to eat slowly, savoring the flavors. Fruit was something that she and Movda had rarely come across, save for the berries that grew on the Storm Coast. When she’d finished, licking the last bits of honey from her fingers, she stood and drifted to the door, now closed, that led to the balcony. Bathed in the warm morning light, augmented by the bright shades of the forest’s foliage, the city was just as lovely as the first time she’d laid eyes upon it. She wondered, not for the last time, if it had been worth the bloody cost.

After performing her ablutions, she dressed quickly. In the bedroom there was a small wooden wardrobe that had been filled with a variety of clothing, all of it altered to accommodate her missing arm. She selected a sable dress similar to the one she’d worn the day previous and a grey mantle lined with soft fur. She was clothing herself for warmth; she had every intention of leaving these rooms today in order to explore and get a better feel of the city. Near the wardrobe was a small table and atop it were a lady’s implements: a comb, a brush, a hand mirror, and several small, long strips of ribbon and leather. Boone stopped before it, undoing her braid with her hand. Unbound, her hair fell in thick waves to the small of her back.

Even as Inquisitor she’d never been one to make concessions to vanity, despite Vivienne’s relentless insistence that she do so. Afterward, when she’d become Boone, vanity had been a luxury quickly overtaken by other, more crucial matters. It had been ages since she’d worn something as fine as this dress (plain as it was) and even longer since she’d bothered to care what she looked like to others. But now, for reasons she refused to examine, she was unable to still her hand as it reached for the mirror. She lifted it hesitantly. The face that stared back at her was startling, though it was still familiar. She recognized the solemn mouth, the small, rounded nose, the bold curve of her brows above russet eyes, with all of it framed by the fall of her dark brown hair. The strain of the past ten
years had left its definite mark, though. It wasn’t that she had aged a great deal; in truth, she was surprised at how little a physical mark time had left upon her. What was so striking was that she looked haunted, burdened, dogged perpetually by ghosts that nobody else could ever truly comprehend.

She set the mirror down slowly. After a moment she grasped the brush and ran it through her hair several times. She decided to leave it loose. Before she left the room she put on a pair of boots—her boots—which had been sitting in the corner near the wardrobe. They’d been cleaned, the soles replaced. Boone was grateful that she’d been left something of her old life, though she wondered why. They weren’t really the appropriate footwear to compliment a dress and there were a pair of simple kidskin slippers at the bottom of the wardrobe, but she wanted to venture out into unknown surroundings wearing something that was comfortingly familiar.

Irithala was waiting for her in the main room. The tray that had held Boone's breakfast was gone, presumably removed by the same man who’d brought it. As Boone stepped into the room she looked expectantly at Irithala. The Elvhen woman was standing near the door, hands clasped behind her back. She was comely and clearly younger than Boone, with blonde hair bound back into a bun and large green eyes. She was dressed simply, with no visible indicator as to her status. Boone wondered if she were a mere servant or whether she was something more, another agent of the Dread Wolf meant to keep a close eye on his guest.

“Hahren’asha,” Irithala said, dipping her head politely. “What would you like to do?”

Boone wondered at the honorific, but the question she’d been posed demanded her immediate attention.. “I … what can I do?”

“Whatever you’d like.”

Except go home, Boone thought, but knew that presenting that topic right now would get her nowhere. Instead she asked, “May I see the city?”

The Elvhen woman nodded and gestured for Boone to follow her. She slipped through the door Solas had left by the night before. They entered a short corridor, carved through the actual trunk of the tree, which spilled abruptly out into sunlight. They were immediately besieged by wind, its sharp, cold gusts reminding Boone that the season was on the verge of changing. The two women stood on a large balcony, enclosed directly in front of them by a railing. On the right, a wooden bridge spanned a long expanse before connecting to another tree. To the left there was another bridge, narrow and made of the same white stone that Boone had seen elsewhere in the city. It connected to a huge, impressive building not far off.

“What is that?” Boone pointed to the building. Though set upon the ground, its walls rose as high as the lowermost branches of the massive trees. Like the bridge connecting it to the balcony, it was also made of stone.

“That's the keep. Enansal Vir. It is where many of our keepers live and where our council governs.”

Her answer only created more questions. It was occurring to Boone how very little she knew about the Elvhenan, of how very little effort she’d made to learn. She overrode her burning curiosity and stored the questions for later, for Solas. She approached the railing, leaning over it to see how far it was to the ground.

“How do I get down?”

Irithala had moved and was standing next to the wooden bridge, near the door leading back into her
rooms. There was a lift there, similar in design to what she’d seen in the Deep Roads many years ago. She looked upward to find that the system of pulleys and gears that would move the lift were attached in complex order to the trunk of the tree.

“This is the fastest way,” Irithala said, “but if you prefer, there are stairs.” She pointed to the other side of the balcony, where Boone could see that a narrow set of wooden stairs descending in a spiral around the tree trunk. It was no contest; she approached the lift.

“This lever,” Irithala said, pointing, “will take you down. The one next to it will bring you back up. It’s not fast, but it is steady.”

“Faster than those stairs, I’d wager,” Boone commented.

“Yes, much.” There was just a hint of a smile on Irithala’s face. That fact heartened Boone a little. She hadn’t been certain whether those living in this city would be willing to tolerate a human presence.

Boone stepped into the lift. It swayed a little from the strength of the wind and she gripped the side immediately. A little breathless, she asked Irithala, “Will you be coming with me?”

The other woman shook her head, “No, I’ve duties elsewhere. You’re free to go where you wish.”

“Am I?” Boone wondered aloud, and immediately regretted it. This too was a question for Solas, not a woman who may have no idea whatsoever who Boone really was or why she was here.

Whether Irithala heard or not, she couldn’t be certain. “Ring for me if you need me upon your return, Hahren’asha.”

“But where will you be?”

Irithala pointed downward. “Yours is not the only home in this tree. I live here as well. You’ll see as you go.” And with a little wave of farewell, Irithala made her way to the stairs. It was as clear a dismissal as any, so Boone pulled the lever. The lift lurched into motion, swaying even more. While Boone had never had height-sickness, there was something about being suspended in a moving lift this far above ground that made her a little apprehensive. It had been the same in the Deep Roads, but far worse. She occupied herself during the long descent by studying the other buildings. Irithala had spoken the truth; other abodes had been constructed around and carved from the tree. As with the rest of the architecture she’d seen from her balcony, the woodwork was intricate, elegant but sturdy. The lift Boone now occupied was accessible from every level, and the staircase that Irithala had taken made its way all the way to the ground.

When finally the lift shuddered to a halt, she stepped out onto ground covered in a thick carpet of shed leaves. Craning her head back, she marveled at how high she’d been just a short time before. She turned on the spot, taking in her new surroundings. Trees, just as large and majestic as the one she’d descended from, rose with towering imperiousness all around. Streets made of white cobbled stone meandered through the trunks, leading down a gentle incline to a large cluster of buildings—the city proper. Boone remained where she was, inwardly debating whether to go down into the city or to approach the keep. She recalled the name Irithala had given the keep: Enansal Vir.

She began to walk north, toward the keep. As she traveled, ghostly hints of voices reached her ears, drifting down from above, scattered by the wind. Who lived up there, she wondered—the affluent? The noble? Other “guests” of Fen’Harel? She glimpsed people walking on the streets not far off, the everyday citizens of any city. Seeing the Elvhen thus, able to traverse their city without any fear, without any subjugation, it suddenly became easier for her to understand why Solas had fought so
hard for his people. If only it hadn’t come at such a great price…

She chose to stay off the streets, instead roaming the forest floor, weaving between the trees. She was uncertain of her status here in the capital city of the Elvhenan, was unsure how she would be viewed. Such was the expanse of Era’Adahlen that it was easy for her to avoid others. Her eyes were continually moving as she walked, taking in the sights so new, so intriguing, so unlike what she’d pictured for so many years. She considered briefly attempting to find the gates to the city, considered whether or not she should try to leave through them. She discarded the notion instantly, knowing without a doubt that should she do so, she would be found and returned immediately, either by Solas or those under his command.

Abruptly, the air in front of her rippled. With a yelp, Boone stumbled backward, clutching at her chest. What—? It was still there, whatever it was, a floating, watery apparition that, having passed right in front of her, continued on its way. Boone turned to keep it in her line of sight, eyes narrowed in order to try to keep it in focus.

“It is a spirit.”

Startled yet again, Boone whirled around. Solas stood some several feet away, hands clasped behind his back. Like her, he was dressed for warmth, a black fur-lined cloak draped over his shoulders with the cowl drawn up. The bitter caress of the wind had left color high in his cheeks. His eyes were fixed where hers had been only seconds earlier. Once again the sight of him made her feel as though, for the briefest of moments, the very ground she stood upon had plummeted away. It was a struggle for her not to snap at him, to lash out angrily for a misdeed he’d not yet committed. She tamped down the swell of enmity, not wanting a repeat of their last discussion.

“What kind of spirit?” she asked instead.

Solas was smiling faintly as he tracked the spirit’s movement. “Compassion,” he said with soft fondness.

Boone turned, attempting to relocate the ripple in the air. It took her long moments to find it again, still to her eyes a wavering apparition drifting toward the city. “How can you tell?”

“I can see it clearly.” She glanced over her shoulder at him inquisitively. Stepping up beside her, he elaborated. “I’m not certain why. Perhaps because I spent so much time in the Fade before …” He paused, clearing his throat.

Before I tore the Veil apart.

Her mouth thinned into a dour line. There were words, so many of them, that she wanted to hurl at him as she would a spear. The reminder of her failure to protect Thedas from his actions brought shame as it always did, but this time resentment rode hard behind it. You used me! She wanted to cry, you made me your pawn, your puppet. You used me!

You broke me!

She could taste the words, balanced on her tongue, ready to spill from her lips heated and virulent. She swallowed them as she would the most acrid of medicines, grimacing with the effort. It would be too easy to relapse into the weeping mess she’d been the day before, too easy to become steeped in double-edged recriminatory musings. So she made an effort to reign in her anger, to wrangle it aside in order to act with some semblance of clarity.

“Why haven’t I seen spirits anywhere else but here?”
He eyed her sidelong, surprised. She knew he’d expected her next words to be hostile and accusatory. It mollified her a little to know that she was capable of catching him off guard, even after all this time, even after she’d become something far less than what she’d once been.

“They are out there, some of them,” he responded, looking back to the spirit. “But they prefer to be where they feel most welcome. What I knew of the Fade, I imparted to my people. Fear of spirits gave way to wonder and curiosity. The rest of Thedas, however, is still mired in misconceptions and uncertainties. It makes the spirits uncomfortable, fearful even. Thus, most have flocked here.”

Boone thought on that. The spirit had vanished, so she let her gaze roam to the keep instead. At her side, Solas drew his cloak tighter about his shoulders. “Shall we walk?”

Boone debated refusing, but she didn’t want to return her rooms just yet. The fresh air and the brisk wind had revitalized her, making her mind feel clearer. She nodded her agreement and when Solas began to move she kept pace. They traveled in silence for a long while, their steps rustling through the fallen leaves, the intermittent gusts of wind pulling at their cloaks and her hair.

“It will snow soon,” she said, disliking the quietude that had fallen because of the emotions that hung rife within it.

“Yes,” Solas agreed. “I think you will appreciate winter in Era’Adahlen. It is quite beautiful.”

“It’s beautiful now.” She tilted her head to gaze upon the spires of the keep, the majestic arching bridges that connected it to the treetop dwellings, the walls of light stone.

She could see from the periphery of her vision that he had slanted her another startled glance. “I am glad you think so.”

“I am not so lost that I cannot appreciate beauty, Solas. What you have created here is astounding, truly. What I cannot appreciate is the toll its creation took on the rest of Thedas.”

She heard him inhale deeply, quickly, ready to debate or deflect. Rather than let a disagreement burgeon into existence, she instead quickly presented him with a question. “Is it much like Arlathan?”

He considered what she’d asked as they continued to walk. “No,” he finally replied, his voice twined with sorrow and regret. “There will never be another city like Arlathan.”

“But you tried to create Era’Adahlen in its image, did you not?”

He didn’t respond immediately, and his silence prompted Boone to glance his way. He was looking downward, watching each step he took. She was struck by how saddened he appeared in that moment, made naked and vulnerable by his memories of the great city lost to time. His expression shifted as he became aware of her scrutiny, adopting its familiar unreadable quality.

“I wanted this city to be a tribute to what had fallen and what was lost. Arlathan was built of magic, born of magic. The city was as much a part of the Elvhen as was air or sunlight. It was a creation of the people, created by their thoughts, their musings, their aspirations. It was the most beautiful city upon this earth, a beacon of understanding and enlightenment. I wish I could convey to you how remarkable it was, but there exist no words that can truly describe it.”

As Boone listened to him, she could not help but marvel at how animated he had suddenly become. It was as if he were living now within that most cherished memory of Arlathan, as though he were walking its streets. She was witnessing a fleeting glimpse of how he must have been so many centuries ago, a man eager for learning, full of flaring passion for his people and his culture. It was
easy to see in that moment just how he’d become a revolutionary power, taking on the mantle of Fen’Harel and rallying so many to his cause.

Caught up in what he was saying, Solas was oblivious to her intense observation. He continued, “I had hoped to return the Elvhen people to what they had been before I’d created the Veil. I had not anticipated that they had been so fundamentally altered by the passage of time that their separation from the magic that had so shaped them was permanent. As you likely know, mages of every race experienced an … increase, if you will, in their powers after the Veil was destroyed. But even that was not enough to return Elvhen magic users to the mastery they’d once known.”

They’d reached the easternmost corner of the keep. What lay before them now was the wall of the city and beyond it the Brecilian forest, dense and a little forbidding, standing guard over Era’Adahlen. In an unspoken agreement both Boone and Solas turned around and began slowly walking back the way they’d come.

He continued, “Arlathan’s architecture was rooted in the arcane, but recreating such a city was no longer a possibility. And so Era’Adahlen was built by traditional means, with traditional materials.”

“This is not all Elvhen design, though,” Boone said. “The lifts, some of the stonework—they appear dwarven.”

“They are.”

Boone’s question was implied in her raised eyebrows as she looked at him. He smiled. “The new Elvhenan will not repeat the mistakes of its predecessor. It will look to other races for aid or inspiration instead of partitioning itself away. We approached the architects and engineers of Orzammar when building, seeking their assistance. As you’ve seen, they agreed to lend their help.”

“Impressive,” Boone said, meaning it.

“Yes.” That one word fairly resonated with pride.

They continued to walk and this time when silence fell between them, it was comfortable. Boone felt at ease for the first time in a very long time and wondered at that. She wasn’t exactly relaxed, but the internal, chaotic rift that had deepened since Solas had reappeared in her life had been temporarily pacified. She wondered if it was the sense of serenity that seemed to blanket the city, or if it was because she was frightened of having another feud with Solas the same scale as their last. And, a small part of her wondered if perhaps this calm was due to his sorcery.

Driven by that last thought, she asked, “Am I truly in danger anywhere but here?”

He came to an abrupt halt. A half-step ahead, Boone stopped as well, turning to face him. All traces of pride and ease were gone from his face, replaced by hard, grim lines. “You’ve been marked by the Mien’Harel. They are relentless and they are prolific. There is nowhere you could go where they would not eventually find you. And you must consider this: the danger is not only to you, but anyone else around you. They do not care how many shemlens they must slaughter in order to further their cause.”

His use of the callous, derogatory term for humans stung a little, but she refused to let it show. “I have not been idle these past ten years, Solas. There are places I could go, friends I could call on—”

“Heartwall?” he interrupted with a small, odd smile. It made her uneasy. “Or rather, Thom Rainier? Yes, I know. Is he not away in the Free Marches, a mercenary? Is it to him you’d go?”

She was not surprised by how much he knew, but by the tone his voice had taken. On the surface it
was pleasant, but she’d heard and recognized a thin bitter undertone. Despite her earlier resolve not to let her any of his words or actions rile her, she felt the first faint stirrings of anger. “Yes, I would go to him. I could easily hide myself in the Free Marches.”

“Do you think so?”

Boone could feel the thunderous scowl forming on her face. It was a struggle to keep it at bay. “It was my home for many years. What better place?”

“The influence the Mien’Harel exert extends far beyond Ferelden. Wherever you go, they will follow. And not even your good friend Rainier will be able to protect you from them.”

“Thom has been a far better friend to me than most.” Her words were quiet but pointed, laced with venom. “And he has protected me these past ten years, from every threat, from any threat.”

“But not from me,” Solas replied, still smiling his strange, brittle smile.

“If he knew where I was—”

“He would be here as swiftly as if he’d grown wings, battering himself bloody against the gates of this city, demanding to see you. Yes, Evelyn, I know. I know Thom Rainier would die for you, happily and without question.”

To hear the truth so baldly, in a tone that was equal parts envy and contempt, nearly staggered Boone. The fragile tethers holding her temper at bay dissolved. She lunged toward him, stabbing him in the chest with one finger. Startled by how swiftly she’d moved, he fell back a step.

“How dare you?” she hissed. “How dare you mock the one man who has never demanded anything from me? Who did his best to keep me together when I could have so easily have just ceased to be, when I wanted to cease to be? After being your puppet for four fucking years, I lost everything I was, everything I had—everything but Thom.”

She was so livid she was nearly choking. The fingers of her hand had curled into a fist and in her mind’s eye she saw herself letting that fist fly, saw it colliding with his jaw. She sucked in a deep, shaking breath and backed away, first one step and then another, shocked yet again by how deep the rivers of her fury ran.

“You will say and do as you will,” she told him, every word nuanced with feeling, “But you will not mock Thom. You will not.”

“No,” he said, nearly in a whisper. And then, his voice stronger: “No. I will not. Ir abelas.”

“Tel’abelas.” Her mastery of the Elvhen language, though weak, allowed her that at least. She stared at him, trembling with outrage, before turning on her heel and stalking away.

He followed, as she knew he would. She heard his running steps behind her and spun back around to confront him. “No! Do not speak to me, Solas! Whatever we have to say to each other, it always ends like this! Perhaps it is a sign. You and I—we are adversaries. It is all we have ever been. It’s what we are now.”

He refused to listen to her. “What I said—I should never have uttered those words. You are right. Rainier is a good man, a better man than any other for having kept you safe all these years. Evelyn, I am sorry.”

She wanted to believe he was lying now in order to earn her forgiveness, wanted to continue being
battered to and fro by the powerful waves of her furor. But his eyes were troubled, clouded by remorse, and she could read his distress plainly upon his face.

“I cannot endure this,” Boone said tiredly. The rush of her anger had drained away as swiftly as it had risen, leaving her feeling wearied. “Every time we speak, we argue. If I am to remain here … perhaps it would be best if we kept our distance. There is too much between us that we could possibly be anything but this.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Boone’s breath left her in a huff of incredulity. “No? We’ve been fighting since you appeared at the coast.”

He regarded her for a long moment, the muscles in his neck taut with frustration. “Every time I look at you, I am reminded of what I have done. Nobody understands better than I what mistakes I have made. In you I see them all, am reminded of what I’ve cost this world because of the sins of my pride and my arrogance. I meant what I said to you that day: I would make amends, if there’s any way I possibly could.”

Boone’s voice lilted with disbelief. “Amends for what? For manipulating me into closing the Breach? For the fact that I lost an arm because of your orb? Or for ripping down the Veil and letting my world and my people burn?”

“For all of it. For every way I’ve wronged you—wronged everyone.”

“I wish I could believe you. I do. But every time we speak I’m certain that there’s something I’m not being told, some secret that will rise to catch me unawares. Can you swear to me that it isn’t so, Solas?”

He said, as he had before, “I mean you no harm.”

She shook her head, frowning. “That’s not an answer.”

She started to turn, to walk away again, but he knifed in front of her, his strides longer than hers. He did not touch her, though she thought he would. “Evelyn—”

“It’s much the same for me, you know,” she told him, one corner of her mouth edging upwards into an unhappy half-smile. “When I look at you I am reminded that I walked away from the greatest threat this world has ever known. Every life lost after you destroyed the Veil is a life I could have saved, if only …”

The other words she would have said caught in her throat, barbed and painful, and she suddenly could not look at him any longer. She lowered her head. “And here we are,” she said roughly. “Forever at odds. Tell me Solas, does it not tire you?”

“No.”

She raised her head to see his face. His expression was sober and he was searching her face as though seeking something he desperately needed to find. A lock of her hair had fallen forward, partially covering her brow. She watched as his eyes traced that fall of hair, knew his intent even as his hand was lifting, even as he was slowly, gently, brushing it back. It frightened her to know that he wanted to touch her.

It frightened her to know that a part of her craved that touch.

His hand swiftly fell away, as though he’d belatedly realized his transgression. He took a step back,
recreating the boundaries between them. “We were friends once,” he remarked wistfully. “I had hoped we could become such again.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “But it will be difficult.”

“Most worthy things are.”

She found she was smiling a little and shook her head to dispel it, startled by how willingly her face would betray emotions she had not yet learned to control or fathom. “I find I am tired. I would return to my rooms, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. If you need anything—”

“Yes, I know. Irithala explained it to me.”

“Very well. Dareth shiral, Boone.”

His unexpected decision to use her preferred name took her aback. He saw and recognized her reaction, not bothering to mask his smile as he turned and began making his way back toward the keep. Beset by a mingled, perplexing sense of relief and disappointment at his departure, Boone began walking in the opposite direction.

The next day brought pleasing change.

Her meals were brought to her by the same man as the day prior, who seemed torn between sneaking as many glances at her as he possibly could and trying his hardest not to look in her direction. She greeted him every time, but he could not manage more than a quiet, harried, “hello.” She wondered if he was so skittish because he knew who she was, or if it was simply because she was a human in the Elvhen city.

It was mid-afternoon when Irithala arrived. Boone, seated near the windowed wall gazing out at the city, stood as she entered.

“Aneth ara, Hahren’asha,” the Elvhen woman said. At Boone’s blank stare, she colored a little. “I’m sorry, my lady. I’ve become so used to speaking Elvhen of late that I sometimes forget not to.”

“It’s quite all right,” Boone replied, smiling.

“Keeper Fen’Harel has sent me,” Irithala said. “He would have you accompany me, if it pleases you.”

“Keeper Fen’Harel?”

Irithala looked bewildered at the question. “Yes. He is our High Keeper, though he prefers to be addressed with no title. It is he that chairs our council.”

“I see. You’ll forgive me, I’m not familiar with … well, much of anything around here.”

Irithala hummed, an unconcerned sound. She seemed to have warmed somewhat to her human ward. Boone couldn’t help but wonder if that was in fact the case or if she’d merely been instructed to be friendly. “Would you care to come with me?” the Elvhen woman asked.

Boone nodded. She followed as Irithala led her out of her rooms and across the stone bridge to the keep. Their path from there became less linear as they left the ramparts and descended into a system
of corridors within the keep proper. Irithala’s pace was brisk and Boone was forced at times to run to keep up after halting to gawk through doorways, overwhelmed by curiosity. Their destination, once reached, lay beyond a large archway lit with torches on either side.

It wasn’t until they stepped in a rectangular room with windows that Boone realized they’d reached the northernmost side of the keep. It appeared to be a study, complete with numerous bookshelves, a large fireplace, and scattered bits of furniture. The walls of the room were all painted, displaying stark images with dark, bold colors. She swallowed, suddenly apprehensive. She would recognize Solas’ artwork anywhere.

“Is this the, ah, High Keeper’s …?”

“Yes,” Irithala said. She’d approached a writing desk in one corner of the room and grabbed something from it. She walked back to Boone and handed her a folded piece of parchment. “He asked that you read this.”

Boone, powerfully eager and hating that fact, unfolded the sheet to see what was written. Movement drew her attention away from it, and she half-turned to see Irithala exiting the room. Frowning, bemused, she dropped her gaze to the note.

Evelyn,

I regret that there are a number of diplomatic matters that will require my attention for the next several days. I’ve instructed Irithala to take you to Enansal Vir’s library if you so wish. You are also free to roam Era’Adahlen, provided you remember that you are safest within her walls.

You are likely wondering why I had Irithala bring you here today. I would direct your attention to the mirror next to the desk.

She stopped reading and looked up. Set against the wall a few feet from the writing desk was a tall, gilded mirror. Her eyes widened when she realized what she was staring at.

It was an Eluvian.

Her eyes dropped back to the note. The Eluvian you see will take you directly to Movda’s farm. I encourage you to use it as you will. The farm is under guard and you will be well protected. However, I ask that you return here every evening for reasons I’ve already explained. I know it may be difficult to subdue your tendency to be obstinate, but I must insist in this regard.

Until next we speak,

Solas

The corners of her mouth had inched upward as she reached the end of the note, but as she realized she was smiling she immediately shook her head in order to dispel it. Her grin returned, however, as she realized that on the other side of the Eluvian, Movda awaited her. She folded the note quickly, tucking it away, before striding toward the mirror. She stopped in front of it, admiring the intricate gold filigree that comprised its frame, reaching out to touch it gently. The metal was cool under her touch. Her hand drifted toward the glass, fingers ghosting over the surface. She caught her breath as it rippled like water.

She stepped through.
I know this is kind of just creeping along, but I needed to get some things established. Thank you for your patience if you've read this far! Things will start to move faster within the next couple of chapters.

I appreciate every bit of feedback I get, from kudos to comments. Much love to you all.
All paths twine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

...x.

She found Movda on her hands and knees in the garden, weeding her row of autumn tubers with the slow, careful precision with which she did most things. The sight of her dear friend, with her long white hair tucked into a messy bun and her dress smudged with dirt, brought comfort to Boone in a tidal surge. The smile that creased her face was genuine, radiant, and it was mirrored in her voice when she called her friend’s name.

Movda was on her feet instantly, unfolding with a swiftness that belied her age. Boone took several running steps until she was able to wrap her arm around the other woman. Movda oomphed with the force of the collision but returned the embrace, her wiry arms encompassing Boone tightly. Movda smelled of damp earth and fresh air and the soap she washed with, and Boone deeply inhaled the scents as she pulled the older woman even closer.

“So he is as good as his word,” Movda remarked when they parted, patting Boone on the shoulder. “He brought the mirror two days ago. I didn’t think I’d be seeing you so soon.”

Boone had known that Solas likely traveled through arcane, unconventional means, but was surprised all the same. With some concern she asked, “What did he say?”

Movda hooked her arm around Boone’s elbow and tugged her along, toward the compound’s gate. “As little as possible. Refused to answer any of my questions, would only tell me that you were fine. And that the mirror would allow us to visit each other. I didn’t quite believe him and I told him so.”

Boone, envisioning that particular discussion, felt her lips quirk upward into a smirk. “And?”

Movda snorted. “And he looked at me all uppity like and told me he was sorry I felt that way.”

Boone had no trouble envisioning that expression on Solas’ face, either. She felt a giggle, both absurd and warranted, bubbling up the back of her throat. She swallowed it as she would a hiccup. In Movda, Solas had found his equal, at least in the matter of wills.

They crossed into the compound, Movda nodding at the Elvhen soldiers posted at either side. There were two more inside the compound, armed and vigilant, and Boone was certain that there were others outside the farm, patrolling the perimeter. Solas was as good as his word, it seemed—at least for some things. It relieved her to know that Movda was well and truly protected, that she wouldn’t have to suffer for the accident of merely knowing the woman who’d once been the Inquisitor.

“So, tell me,” Movda said as they neared the house, “how has it been?”

Boone deliberated on her answer as they walked. If she said too much, it would worry Movda, too little and it would raise suspicions. “Tolerable,” she said finally. “I’m … protected. Sheltered and fed.”

“And clothed.” Movda’s fingers plucked at the right sleeve cuff of Boone’s dress.

“Yes,” Boone agreed, “and clothed.”
They’d reached the house. Movda entered first. Boone paused on the threshold, letting her eyes roam the interior. It was so small compared to the rooms she’d been given in Era’Adahlen, cramped and dim and spartan, but it was home, had been for years, and she missed it so much it was a heavy ache somewhere near her heart.

Movda, standing near the hearth, glanced back at Boone. She cocked her head. “Too used to Elvhen luxury to set foot in my humble abode?”

Boone smiled wryly. “Our humble abode. And you know I’d be here if I could.” Unspoken: If he would let me.

“Aye, I know.” Movda gestured to the small table and Boone dutifully took a seat. There was a kettle on the rod over the hearth fire, offset enough that the water would be still be hot but not boiling. Movda set about making tea, the hem of her dress whispering against the uneven planks of the wooden floor. It was such an inconsequential sound but it brought memories flooding back to Boone, memories of meals shared in this room, of late night conversations, of Thom seated in his chair near the fire, whittling some creation out of block of wood.

Ah, Thom, Boone thought. He would be so furious to know what had happened, so unfathomably worried. She knew where he was, roughly, and he’d told her to send him word should anything happen but she hadn’t. She was afraid to. What Solas had said about Thom had been the truth, ironclad and unerring. Thom would risk his very life to ensure that Boone was safe.

Boone’s eyes had been racing around the room, unable to fix on something, trying to sort through the paths her thoughts had taken. Her gaze settled on Movda, standing with two steaming mugs in her hands before the hearth. Movda’s expression echoed hers, an amalgam of worry and sadness and frustration. Sometimes it astounded her how very perceptive the older woman could be.

“And what of Thom?” Movda asked, her words mirroring Boone’s worry. She approached the table, setting down the mugs and sliding one in Boone’s direction.

“I’ve sent him no word. Not yet.”

Movda said nothing as she sat down on the opposite side, but the speculation in her gaze spoke volumes.

“If I tell him, he will stop at nothing to see me. I don’t want him hurt.”

“There are different kinds of hurts.” Movda took a drink of her tea, swallowed, and set the cup down. “You know that better than anyone.”

Yes, and I’ve hurt Thom in all those ways over the years. Boone took a drink of her own tea, fragrant and bitter. “I will send him word, once I better understand what is happening.”

Movda nodded. Boone avoided her gaze for several moments, knowing she couldn’t hold up to its scrutiny. They drank in silence for a while, with Boone hating every minute of it, unable to come up with anything to say that wouldn’t lead back to the plethora of sensitive topics they’d been dancing around.

“Just tell me this,” the older woman finally said. “Has he been treating you well?”

There were so many questions within that one inquiry, all of them, all of them leading to emotions and guesses and predictions that Boone wasn’t prepared to deal with. Not yet. She looked at her friend, meeting Movda’s piercing blue eyes squarely, and spoke the truth as she knew it. “Yes. He says he means me no harm. I believe him. But I also believe there is another reason I’m there, another
use for me even now. There is nothing I can do but wait, Movda. Even if I were to leave, he would find a way to bring me back.”

“His prisoner.”

Boone shrugged, relaying a casual indifference that was the exact opposite of what she actually felt. “Yes and no. I am free to go where I will. I am free to visit you here.”

“And yet you must return.”

“Yes.”

“Not a prisoner?”

Boone’s loud exhale was half-laugh, half-snort. Movda was sharp, disconcertingly adept at seeing through pretense. “The answer is no, I don’t believe I am a prisoner. I believe him when he says that I will place anyone close to me in danger, and that includes you and Thom. I cannot—will not—place the two that matter most to me in peril. So … I will return to the city when I am done here, and visit you when I am able.”

“It will be enough if it must be.” Movda leaned back in her chair. “If you are safe and well, that’s what matters. So, on to more important topics: regale me with tales of life in the Elvhen capital.”

Boone, cradling her mug in her hand, smiled fondly at the old woman and complied.

They spoke for hours, of Era’Adahlen, of the food served there, of Movda’s autumn crop, of her food stores for the winter, of repairs needed around the farm. They talked until the light admitted by the house’s small windows faded and the shadows crept in. With the onset of dusk came the unwelcome reminder that this was no longer her home. Reluctantly, she rose to her feet.

“What if you stayed the night?”

Movda’s question was an echo of what was already within Boone’s thoughts. She already had the answer. It had been in Solas’ note, an iron reminder twined within his neat, pleasant writing. She shook her head. “I must return.”

Movda shrugged, a simple roll of her shoulders. She’d already known the answer, too. Boone looked past her, into the tiny bedroom that had been hers, where the Eluvian stood visible against the wall. Her friend came to her feet, coming around the table in order to embrace her once more.

“When will I see you again?”

“As soon as possible,” Boone promised. “Or you could come to Era’Adahlen …?”

“Not bloody likely!”

Boone grinned. “I know.”

She enjoyed her friend’s embrace for a long string of moments before letting her go and then slipping past her, heading into the back room. She paused before stepping through the Eluvian, her eyes falling upon the wooden chest at the foot of the bed. It contained all of her chronicles, every single word she’d scribed over the past decade. She deliberated for a heartbeat only before taking two steps and dropping to her knees in front of the chest. The lid opened with an audible creak; Movda would hear and would know. The books within were all different in size and shape, their leather bindings a veritable rainbow. There were hundreds but she sifted through them easily, quickly and unerringly
able to locate the one she wanted.

With it in hand, she nudged the chest lid down with her elbow. She stood and walked to the Eluvian, glancing back at Movda. The old woman was standing at the table still, watching. Boone raised a hand in farewell. Movda waved in return.

The Eluvian awaited her. Without further delay, she returned through it.

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It was several days before Boone encountered Solas again. When it happened it was an accidental meeting, she leaving the keep's library, he on his way to attend to his duties. She had been walking slowly, an open book about the dissolution of the Alamarri into the Clayne, the Avvar, and the Chasind held in her hand. Reading while walking was challenging—especially with only one hand—but Boone made due by slowly and clumsily turning the page with her thumb. So engrossed in reading about Clayne literature was she that she didn’t register Solas saying her name until she’d nearly passed him.

As was usual, the sight of him flustered her. It was easy to forget when he wasn’t near just how he affected her. As Boone struggled to close the book she’d been reading while maintaining her hold on the two other books tucked beneath her arm, Solas began to smile.

“I see you’ve made good use of the library.”

He sounded tired. Boone looked at him, marking the dark, prominent circles beneath his eyes and the weary slope of his shoulders. It seemed as though he hadn’t slept in days. Knowing very little about just what he spent his time doing, she guessed that that could very well be the case. Aware of her silent scrutiny he averted his face, turning his head a little as if further down the corridor had caught his attention. Realizing that she had been staring, she tossed words out in a belated attempt to be polite. “Yes, and thank you! You’ve a most impressive collection. Every time I’m there I find something else I want to read.”

He’d looked back to her, lips curved in that small smile that she remembered so well from years past. “I am happy you were able to,” he said.

Where were you? she suddenly wanted to ask. Where did you go? What have you done that has you looking so weary, so saddened? She couldn’t ask him those questions, of course, couldn’t let him know how much his every action weighed on her mind.

“Would you dine with me tomorrow evening?”

His question startled her out of her thoughts; she felt her eyes widen. His gaze upon her was steady, solemn, and beneath its intensity she felt an alarming dissonance between old, familiar fears and the unraveling tendrils of an eagerness she was afraid to fully realize. “Yes,” she replied, with an assurance that did not betray her, “I will.”

He gave her that same smile again, flickering and fleeting. “Irithala will bring you,” he said. “I look forward to it. Until then, Boone.”

She turned to watch as he strode past her, his steps confident and driven despite his apparent exhaustion. He’d used her preferred name again, which was perplexing; indeed, she suspected that was the entire reason he’d done it. She turned back around two Elven men rounded the corner, heading in her direction. As she resumed walking she thought hard on the invitation Solas had just given her and on her reaction. She both wanted and dreaded time with him.
So which instinct, she mused, bewildered and grim, was the one that she should heed?

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The next day passed quickly, and Boone spent most of it reading. Despite how limited the Clayne lexicon was, their literature was beautiful in a blunt, poignant way. Given how very little was known about the ancient human tribe, Boone wondered how Solas had managed to find the anthology of poetry, songs, and folklore. It was obviously very old and had clearly been rebound more than once with a skill that was remarkable. She’d seen the same attention to restoration seen with other books in Enansal Vir’s impressive library.

So immersed was she in her reading that it was easy for her to determinedly ignore the contradictory views she had about her upcoming dinner with Solas. Indeed, by the time Irithala slipped into Boone’s rooms with a bundle tucked under one arm, the sun had already begun its descent from the sky.

“I’m here to help you prepare,” the Elvhen woman said. Boone’s eyebrow crooked upwards as she considered Irithala’s words. She had fully intended to attend dinner with Solas looking as she usually did these days: neat, if somewhat plain.

“Prepare in what manner, exactly?” Boone asked. “I don’t believe this is a formal dinner.”

“He is the High Keeper, Hahren’asha!”

Boone grinned at the incredulity in Irithala’s tone. She’d come to know the younger woman better in the past several days. Irithala, once out of her shell, was a very friendly, very animated individual. She was aflame with all the passions of youth, including a fervent, respectful awe for her elders. Boone was both flattered and amused to know that she fit into that category.

“I fail to see what that has to do with my appearance,” she drawled solely for the purpose of seeing how the younger woman would react.

“You cannot dine with the High Keeper dressed like that!” Irithala flapped her hands in Boone’s direction, distress evident on her face.

“I look perfectly presentable,” Boone retorted with a flamboyant pirouette.

“Presentably boring,” Irithala said.

Boone laughed. “Very well. By all means, help me to prepare.”

The Elvhen woman’s expression melted from frustration into eagerness so quickly that it was astonishing. She darted into the bedroom, beckoning for Boone to follow. Her obvious excitement to assist Boone tempered Boone’s own burgeoning nervousness at the prospect of the impending dinner.

Irithala was standing at the bed. She’d set down the bundle she’d been carrying. It was wrapped in dark cloth and Boone, standing in the door, watched as Irithala unfolded it, admiring her enthusiasm while envying it a little too. Irithala had become so openly welcoming that it was sometimes easy for Boone to forget that she was a human in an Elvhen city, a decided outsider. The other Elvhen she’d met—always within the company of Irithala—had reactions that widely varied. Some had been pleasant, others curt. Some had regarded Boone with open, undisguised curiosity, and others had not bothered to speak with her at all. After nearly a month spent in Era’Adahlen, Boone was still very uncertain as to her status among its people.
With a triumphant sound, Irithala held up the unwrapped garment and turned to display it to Boone. It was a gown, the fine fabric dyed the color of ripe currants. The fitted bodice was embroidered in a delicate golden pattern and the hem, modest neckline and waist were subtly enhanced with thin golden edging. Despite her relative disinterest in matters of fashion, the simple elegance of the dress appealed to Boone. Her eyes roamed upward from the hem to the bodice, and abruptly she shook her head. Irithala’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“There are no sleeves,” Boone explained. Unconsciously, her right hand drifted up to settle on her left arm, just above where her elbow had once been.

“It will not matter,” Irithala reassured her in a tone that conveyed understanding and just a tinge of self-satisfaction. She carefully laid the gown down on the bed and picked up something else that had been wrapped within the bundle. She spread her arms out wide to show Boone what she held. It was a capelet the same vivid color as the dress, embellished only with thin gold trim.

Boone’s short burst of laughter managed to somehow sound both resigned and impressed. “You’ve thought of everything,” she told the other woman appreciatively.

“Of course I have!” Irithala huffed. “Now, come. Let me help you.”

“I still have plenty of time!”

“And we must still deal with your hair! Please, Hahren’asha, let me help you dress.”

Boone, still reluctantly amused, surrendered herself to Irithala’s care. The fact that the Elvhen woman was so thoroughly enjoying herself made it easier to succumb to her ministrations. A few minutes later Boone stood clad in the gown, plucking with her hand at the fabric, marveling at how soft and smooth it felt against her skin, marveling too at how well it fit. It had been a very long time since she’d worn something this fine.

“Wherever were you able to find this?” she asked Irithala, who was standing a short distance away, studying her subject with a critical eye.

“I made it.”

Boone, who had been toying with the skirt to watch the way the fabric flowed, looked up at the other woman, astonished. “You made this?”

Irithala nodded, circling around to survey the gown from behind. “You’ve quite the eye,” Boone complimented. “The fit is perfect.”

“Of course it is! I paid attention to how the other dresses I made fit you and made a few adjustments.”

“You made all of those?” Boone’s gaze shot to the armoire with its bevy of dresses.

“Every single one.” Having completed her circuit, Irithala was standing in front of Boone yet again. “Do you like the gown, Hahren’asha?”

There was nothing but honesty in her reply. “Very much.”

Irithala beamed. Her reaction was infectious and Boone couldn’t help but smile back. “Now, go sit. We must tend to your hair.”

As directed, Boone moved to the main room and took a seat in one of the two chairs at the small
wooden table where she took her meals. It felt odd to be wearing clothing with no sleeves; since she’d lost her arm she’d taken great pains to conceal what remained of it. That choice was as much to prevent others from noticing it as it was for her to pretend it away, to forget all the memories attached to it. Now, seated and clothed in the gown the Elvhen woman had created for her, she couldn’t prevent her fingers from drifting up and over to slide over the round expanse of flesh where her arm abruptly ended.

She heard Irithala approaching and let her hand fall to her lap. The other woman had brought with her tools from the bedroom, setting down the brush, comb, and mirror before stepping back and examining Boone with one hand on her hip.

“What shall I do?” she asked.

Boone shrugged a little carelessly. “That is entirely up to you. I would go as I am—”

“You will not!”

“Then,” she said, laughing at how aghast Irithala had sounded, “you may do as you wish.”

With brush in hand, the Elvhen woman determinedly took up position behind Boone and began to undo her long, customary braid. She’d bathed earlier in the day and the thick, heavy mass of her dark hair was still damp. As Irithala gently brushed out the length of it, Boone’s eyes closed in contentment. She found there were few sensations as utterly soothing as someone else touching her hair.

“Irithala,” she said after a moment, needing to speak because if she didn’t, falling asleep was a certainty. “You could make a great deal of coin by selling what you make.”

“Oh, I do!” The Elvhen woman’s fingers were nimble and gentle as they untangled Boone’s hair. “During the annums, when the market is most busy and travelers come to the city. The shemlen ladies seem to like my dresses.”

She’d said shemlen without malice, without prejudice. To her it was simply a word. Boone marveled at that, at the fact that this pretty young woman harbored no ill will at all against mankind after all the centuries of strife between their two races. “Other humans come here, then?” she asked.

“They do,” Irithala responded. “Not many, of course—many are still angry with us. But there are some who, like the High Keeper, want peace. They usually visit in order to meet with the council, and when they are here they often go to the market.”

That was a fascinating piece of information and Boone considered it for a long while as Irithala began to separate her hair into sections. She framed her next question carefully. “Have you always lived here in Era’Adahlen, or did you live in another city? Or were you—”

“Dalish? No, we lived in Denerim. I was only seven when we heard of the High Keeper’s summons and packed up everything we had to come here. I have lived here longer than anywhere else. I can hardly remember what it was like before. This is my home.”

She said the last word with warmth, with feeling, and invoked memories in Boone of her own home. Not the family estate in the Free Marches, no—the place she’d considered her true home had been Skyhold. She’d never felt as secure as she had there, never known a sense of belonging as she had when she’d been a part of the Inquisition.

“You are very young,” she remarked, mentally tallying the years since Solas had destroyed the Veil and warred upon the Evanuris.
“Seventeen. Nearly eighteen.”

Boone could barely recall herself at that age. It seemed a lifetime ago. Irithala had begun working on her hair in earnest, pulling on different lengths as she began to arrange it into a style. “Irithala,” she asked, a little afraid to know the answer, “Do you know who I am?”

There was no telltale hesitation in the Elvhen girl’s movements, no odd inflection in her voice as she replied. “You are an old friend of the High Keeper.”

“He told you this?”

“He did. He said you had been good friends many years ago and that he had found you again. He was seeking someone to be your companion and your guide during your time here. I offered to help.”

Boone was silent, thinking on what had been said. Irithala spoke again, her voice a little softer this time, a little halting. “He has been looking for you for a very long time.”

“Has he.” Boone hadn’t meant for it to slip out as a statement rather than a question, hadn’t meant for those two words to sound so flat.

Irithala’s hands stilled their movements. “Hahren’asha,” she asked in concern, “have I upset you?”

“No,” Boone said quickly, forcing pleasantness back into her tone. Knowing she needed to give a more elaborate explanation, she went on. “The High Keeper and I, we often disagree. There is a lot between us that we must learn to settle.”

“You will,” Irithala said, completely and naively confident in their ability to do so.

But there is so much, Boone wanted to explain, so much between us. There are wars and betrayals and deaths. And there is this, this feeling I have, that I do not want and cannot banish away. I am afraid, Irithala. I do not know what I am doing.

But she could give voice to those thoughts, could not burden this kind young woman with the hard truths she was blissfully unaware of. And so she remained quiet, instead focusing on the sensation of Irithala’s fingers as they threaded through her hair, letting it lull her mind away from those thoughts.

“Done!”

The exclamation startled Boone. She’d let her mind drift well beyond what she’d intended. She lifted her hand to probe lightly at the back of her head, running her fingers along numerous braids, feeling loose tendrils curling against her neck.

“The mirror,” Irithala prompted.

Boone obeyed. What she could see of her hair was a design similar to that of the dress—simple yet refined. Irithala had wound part of her hair into a coronet of small, neat braids. The bulk of her tresses, however, fell in long waves over her shoulders and down her back. Boone stared at herself, feeling pleasure at her appearance, something she hadn’t experience in a very long time.

“It looks perfect,” she said, meaning every word. She stood, turning around, happy to see another pleased, sunny smile on the Elvhen woman’s face. Irithala darted into the bedroom and returned swiftly, carrying the capelet. Boone stood patiently as the girl slipped it over her shoulders and fastened it at the neck before stepping back yet again to scrutinize her work.
“Well?”

“You look wonderful, Hahren’asha! Thank you for letting me help you.”

Boone laughed. “I should be thanking you!” And, unexpectedly flooded with earnest affection for the girl standing before her, she held out her arm to beckon for an embrace. Surprise flowed over Irithala’s face, replaced immediately by a wide grin. Approaching with quick steps, she wrapped both her arms around Boone’s middle and squeezed. And then she slipped away and gestured to the door leading outside. “We must go!” she said. “You can’t be late!”

“I suppose I can’t,” Boone said, following as Irithala began to leave. From the table she’d just been seated at she grabbed a small, leather bound book. She patted at the sides of the gown as she walked and was both pleased and surprised to find that Irithala had included a pocket on the right side. She slipped the book into it before hastening to follow. As they crossed the bridge, Boone’s steps began to slow. The reality that she was about to dine with Solas had set in with foreboding finality, and she felt her nervousness mount with every step she took bringing her closer to the keep.

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Irithala led her beyond Solas’ study, into the heart of his quarters. In a large room lit only by the flickering glow of candle, lantern, and hearth fire, Solas awaited. Seated at a round table laden with food, he stood as the two women entered the room.

“Evelyn,” he greeted, before addressing the young Elvhen woman at her side. “Thank you, Irithala.”

“Of course, Keeper,” she replied. Before she turned to go she placed a hand on Boone’s shoulder, flashing her an encouraging smile.

It was all Boone could do not to ask Irithala to stay, not to whirl around and run after her. The lightheartedness she’d known such a short time ago had fled, chased from her by the reality that awaited her now. It seemed the air between she and Solas was suddenly combustible with the strength of her tensions and her fears—and with the strength of her desires, too. She marshaled her resolve, deteriorated as it was. She’d endured countless political dinners as the Inquisitor and had hated them with a passion she hadn’t known she was capable of feeling. At least this promised to be more enjoyable.

Or so she hoped.

Solas gestured to the chair opposite his. As Boone crossed the room, she hoped her expression was one of pleasant calm. She took her seat self-consciously, acutely aware of his attention from across the table.

“I am glad you’ve come,” he said, reclaiming his own seat.

“I couldn’t very well refuse an invitation to dine with the High Keeper,” she said lightly.

“If there is anything I have learned about you, it is that you will always do as you wish. You would not be here if you did not want to be.”

His tone was just as easy, the words pitched as banter. But it felt like more than that, and as her eyes met his she knew she that he was correct—she did want to be here. That he had such insight into the driving force behind her actions and thoughts was so unsettling that she had to look away.

“You appear more rested than you did yesterday,” she said then, attempting to divert the focused beam of his perception toward something else, toward anything else.
“I am,” he responded. “You look quite lovely, Evelyn. That color suits you.”

She tried to ignore the fluttering sensation she felt in her stomach at his compliment. “It is all Iriithala’s handiwork,” she said, deflecting with self-deprecation. “She is quite capable of working miracles, it would seem.”

“No such a miracle, when beauty is already there,” he said. And then, abruptly: “Shall we eat?”

Boone nodded her agreement, absurdly grateful for the diversion. She turned her attention to the platters and trays of food arranged before her. There was a small roasted capon, redolent with garlic and thyme. Her eyes roamed over small platters with artfully arranged cheeses and candied fruits and a tureen filled with a thick, enticingly aromatic pottage. A veteran of large, lavish dinners, Boone knew that in comparison this was not a particularly extravagant meal. However, it was an inviting one, and Boone was thankful that her eternal appreciation of food was enough to subdue—temporarily—her skittish nerves. She waited until Solas began serving himself before she tucked in, deciding to sample everything available.

As they ate, their conversation was of idle, mundane things. It was so unlike the charged, heated exchanges they’d recently been having that it kept Boone feeling off-kilter. She enjoyed it regardless, enjoyed his witticisms and her genuinely entertained responses, enjoyed most of all the way it felt as though the years had melted away between so that she was again Evelyn and he was again her friend.

I have missed this, she almost said after pushing away her empty plate, after chuckling at his description of the dour dwarven engineers that had come to help create Era’Adahlen. And Maker, Solas, but I have missed you. She had to clench her jaw to prevent that particular admission from slipping forth, swallowing it and chasing it down with a long drink from her cup of water.

Across the table, his features bathed in soft candlelight, Solas reclined in his seat. He did so with his familiar, easy grace, managing to look utterly composed while being entirely relaxed. It was a skill of his she had always envied; as Inquisitor, she’d always had to make an effort to appear that self assured.

“There is wine, if you will,” he told her, waving his hand at a bottle at his end of the table. “Rowan’s Rose. I recall you had an affinity for it.”

Boone had never had much of a tolerance for alcohol but had developed a fondness for lighter fruit wines during her time with the Inquisition. The fact that he still remembered that made her feel off-balance yet again. She suspected it would be a repeat occurrence for the remainder of the evening.

“Yes, please,” she said. As he poured the wine into goblets of worked metal, Boone withdrew the book from her pocket. When he stood to pass her the wine, she held it out to him.

His eyes moved from the book to her face and back again, curiosity written plainly across his face. “You asked to read them,” she reminded him, lifting the goblet to her lips. “That is the first.”

Sudden understanding altered his countenance; she watched as astonishment etched itself into the lines of his face. “I … thank you, Evelyn.”

The wine as it flooded her mouth was crisp and sweet and didn’t leave the dry aftertaste that she abhorred in most other wines. She watched as Solas returned to his seat, holding her chronicle in both hands, gazing at it as though it weren’t entirely real. His eyes, when they rose to find hers once more across candlelight, were unguarded, candid in their appreciation.
“Who was the first?” he asked her. “Whose story set you on this path?”

“Movda,” she said. His eyes widened. She couldn’t help but smirk. She’d manage to surprise him twice in short order. It was a nice feeling, one worth savoring.

“I had not thought …”

“Hmm?”

“Your friend, she seems very … capable. Indomitable, even.”

Boone’s smile grew. “She is both of those things, yes.”

“I had not considered that she was a—a survivor.”

Her expression abruptly curdled. “Why? Because compared to me, she’s remarkably self composed? Not prone to fits of anger at the reminder of just why the world suffered?”

His frown was equal parts confusion and concern. “Evelyn.”

She tore her eyes from him with a frustrated noise, attempting to wrestle her anger into submission. She knew it wasn’t irrational—she had the scars, both physical and not, to prove it. What bothered her was how quickly and unexpectedly she kept losing control of her emotions in his presence.

“Forgive me,” she managed to utter. “I know you meant no insult. It is just … tonight it was so easy to pretend that you and I—that we didn’t destroy the world. And then what you said … I am sorry, Solas.”

“I understand.”

Face still averted lest he witness the telltale procession of her thoughts and feelings across her expressive face, she watched from the periphery of her vision as he stood and crossed the room. Something in her chest tightened. Had she insulted him so greatly that he would take his leave? But he returned almost immediately, carrying a small, thin box in one hand. He didn’t retake his seat, instead coming to stand before Boone.

“I too have a gift,” he said, opening the box and holding it out for her to see. She peered down at it, having to squint a little to see it in the dim, flickering light. It looked like a bracelet, although it seemed to be too large for that purpose.

“It is made of white willow,” Solas explained, fitting the lid beneath the box and carefully lifting the item out. “It is braided, do you see? Carved and polished by one of the most skilled Elvhen artisans I was able to find.”

“It’s beautiful,” Boone said. And it was. Able to view it more clearly, she could see each feature as he described it, could truly appreciate the effort that had gone into to coaxing such a delicate, intricate thing out of a material that was by nature unyielding. She was still confused, however; it was definitely too large to be a bracelet and was far too small to be a necklace. She’d opened her mouth to voice her question but stopped as Solas, after placing the empty box down on the table, knelt before her.

“May I?” He asked softly, gesturing to her left arm.

Boone found that her mouth had suddenly gone dry, her tongue cloven to the roof of her mouth. Incapable in that moment of speaking, all she could do was nod her head once. Solas reached out
and lifted the capelet, draping it over her shoulder so that the remaining expanse of her arm was laid bare. She could do nothing but watch, wide-eyed, as he slipped the armllet over her flesh. His touch was faint, almost hesitant, as he slid the wooden ring up until it rested just above where her elbow had once been. When he’d finished, when it was secure against her skin, cold and hard and startlingly there, his eyes slowly trailed across the slope of her shoulder, the line of neck, grazing her chin, her lips, her nose, until finally they found her own.

He said into the silence that had fallen between them, “Do not be frightened.”

*Of what?* The question never left her. She was suddenly awash in pain, a burning, prickling sensation originating from the point of contact between her her flesh and the armllet. Solas caught her wrist as she attempted to tear it off.  “Wait, Evelyn. Please.”

And then she saw what was happening. She stared in horrified awe as something began growing, as tiny white saplings extended downward from the armllet, waving and spiraling as though seeking each other. Watched as those tendrils, hundreds of them, joined together, wove together, plaiting themselves into such a complex, beautiful pattern that it defied comprehension. Watched as they became something unbelievable, as they tapered into a narrow channel, as they widened before branching out into five long, delicate digits—

Evelyn jolted out of her chair with a cry of stunned disbelief. And it was done—Solas’ gift had shaped an arm, an arm that was dizzying in its arcane perfection.

Her voice was trembling, breathless. “*What have you done?*”

“Returned what I have taken from you.”

The sound that left her was nearly a whimper, a mewl of so many conflicting emotions that it fairly resonated in the space around them. She could say nothing, do nothing but observe as Solas, still kneeling, took her new hand in his own. She could feel his fingers there, could feel the firm but gentle pressure he exerted in order to rotate her wrist. She could feel it as he unclenched her new fingers, one at a time. He lifted his eyes to hers and there was such intensity there, such purpose, that it stole whatever breath she had left.

*Don’t!* she wanted to shout, without knowing why. And then she was helpless, mute and immobile, as he lowered his head to press a kiss directly against her palm.

Her blood ran hot in that instant, flowing molten through every vein in her body. It was an agony she craved with a desperation she was terrified to admit. His lips were soft, warm against her newly rendered magical flesh. His eyes refused to release her, captors that housed within them a riot of emotions that were mirrored in her own. It was there between them, a want so powerful it was nearly a tangible thing. After a string of suspended moments he lifted his head, his thumb replacing his kiss, tracing slow, gentle circles against her palm.

“Evelyn,” he whispered, and there was need in that one word, naked and raw, revealed to her as though it had been a wild thing, imprisoned for far too long, desperate for release.

“Solas,” she breathed, certain that one word was lost to the frantic thunder of her heart.

“Forgive me,” he said. His touch fell away from her in a slow caress. He remained kneeling, looking up at her. *He will go now,* she thought, *he will deny this. As he ever did. As he always did.* But he did not withdraw, as she feared he would, as she half-wanted him to.

“It is not permanent, if you do not want it to be.” He was speaking in a low, even voice. She knew
he was attempting to keep her calm. “All you need do is remove the armlet.”

She’d managed to locate her voice, somehow, but the only thing she could manage to say with it was embarrassing in its inanity. “I had not expected … that.” She was speaking of more than just the armlet’s effect.

“Nor had I,” he admitted, sounding more than a little surprised himself. “But I am learning that with you and I, the unexpected is often the norm.”

Her eyes were on her right hand. Her new hand. She turned it this way and that, watching the play of the candlelight over flesh that wasn’t really flesh, tiny branches woven together with symmetry that even nature would envy. She flexed her fingers, losing herself in the wonder of actually having fingers after missing them for so long.

“It is a wonderful gift,” she told him emphatically, hoping to redirect the conversation. She was still trembling from his kiss and fervently hoped he would not notice. “How did you—?”

“I searched.” he said simply. “For a time, I feared this sorcery would elude me forever. But I found the answers finally in the Vir Dithara, in tomes so ancient they were old when even I was born.”

“And you enchanted the armlet?”

“Yes. To create the first of reparations to you.”

There was nothing left for her to say but to try to express her gratitude. But every way she thought to say it sounded to her trite and overused.

He saw and recognized her earnest appreciation in her expression and acknowledged it. “You are most welcome.” He stood. “Now, there is the matter of dessert?”

Boone’s laugh was faint and a little hysterical. So much had happened in such short order that everything felt a little surreal. “If you’ll forgive me, I think it best I retire for the night. It has been a bit …”

Solas was smiling. “Overwhelming?”

“Yes.” He had moved back to his side of the table. She experienced a rush of dismay at that fact, followed immediately by a sense of relief. She shook her head; it was all too much. She needed to be alone, needed time to think, needed to sleep, though she knew sleep would be an impossibility. There was no way she would be able to dull her mind enough to sleep when she knew with a certainty that it would circle endlessly around two things: the fact that she had her right arm again, and the sensation of his lips against her palm.

She stood, resting her new hand on the back of her chair. The action felt odd and unfamiliar. “Thank you,” she said. She was grateful for more than just the gift. He had chosen not to pursue anything further after bestowing his kiss. Her turmoil had been obvious and genuine and she hoped he’d withdrawn out of respect for that.

But a part of her could not help but wonder if all of this was not just part of a larger plan.

“It was my pleasure, Evelyn.” He’d sat down again, goblet in hand. “Rest well.”

“Good night, Solas.” She let her hand fall from the chair and crossed the room to the door, the weight of his gaze a shadow at her back.
Whelp, this chapter was a beast.

Again, all of my gratitude to those of you who have supported me thus far. You've no idea how much your feedback inspires me. Hope I continue to entertain in the chapters yet to come.

(Also, to anyone interested, I've got an explanation of some things regarding Boone's story on my Tumblr.)
And I cross into dreams, the hero

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Rape is implied in this chapter.

27 Kingsway
9:41 Dragon

I have walked physically in the Fade.

I will admit I’ve been ignorant. I assumed the Fade was a pleasant dreamscape, save for when you cross paths with demons. What I experienced was not pleasant. It was horrifying, a landscape tortured and twisted, rife with things I still see as lingering shadows when I close my eyes. And the Black City—we saw it, suspended above us, a terrible, blackened citadel that promised nothing but despair.

I have never been as frightened as I was in the Fade. Even in the company of my companions—Varric, Dorian, Blackwall, Hawke and her friend, the Warden Stroud—I could not shake the terror, could not take comfort in their presence. It clung to me the way an insect might, intent on sucking from me all confidence, all sense of solace I’ve ever known. Demons lurked in the periphery of my vision with every step I took, reminding me that I was not worthy of the Anchor, netting me with whispers that echoed my deepest fears. It seemed the entirety of the Fade had been created solely to enlighten me to the fact that I would fail the Inquisition, and in doing so, destroy the world.

I cannot speak of what other nameless horrors I saw. I will not speak of it. Our escape from the Fade came only through sacrifice; Warden Stroud lives no more. Erimond has been dealt with. Hawke has left for Weisshaupt. And the Inquisition still exists.

I wish it would have ended there, but the Fade refused to relinquish its hold over me. I don’t speak of simple memories of my time within it; I speak of something literal, something real. My steps were shadowed by a creeping enmity, horrors partially obscured during the day by my duties as Inquisitor, by the conversations I shared with others, by something as regular as the light of the sun.

But at night … ah, at night they converged on me in force. Sleep was no longer a welcome reprieve from the tediums or frustrations of the day. Sleep became a prison, because that was when the horrors were able attack me with unmitigated focus. What started as vaguely disturbing dreams grew into something substantial, something so vivid it bled into the waking world. It was the Fade—once unimaginable, once only a theory to me. It had attached itself to me as I walked physically through it, an abhorrent parasite intent on torturing me to the point of insanity.

The nightmares … they will never leave me. They are as much a part of me now as every other scar I bear. Fully realized, they always played out the same. I would always be in the Deep Roads, alone. I would wander, cautious and afraid, following the roads wherever they might lead. And always they would swarm me, catching me unawares, darkspawn pouring out from hidden fissures in the cavern walls that I hadn’t seen. They wouldn’t kill me, though always by the end I begged them to.

I was to become their Broodmother. Captive in the nightmares, I relived nightly the darkspawn efforts to change me. They forced my mouth open as they ripped pieces of flesh from their bodies
before shoving that flesh down my throat. They choked me with streams of their blood, thick and vile and black, so black. They defiled me, a horde intent on one purpose and driven with mindless determination to that end. And always in those nightmares I could feel as the Change began, as the taint took hold, as my body began to alter itself into a monstrosity so abhorrent that even the Maker could not bear to look upon it.

In very short order I could not bear to relive the hellish dreams that were always the same. Sleep became an occurrence I avoided at all costs. My exhaustion quickly became apparent to everyone around me. I was irritable, emotional, incapable of clear thought. I was not the only one affected by the Fade—Blackwall, Dorian, and Varric all confessed to me the malevolent, lingering effects of our journey through it. But if any of them were experiencing what I was, they were keeping quiet. And what could I do? Confess to my companions that I feared I was going insane? Confess that the bearer of the Anchor, the leader of the Inquisition, spent her nights huddled before the hearth, wrapped in blankets and desperately attempting to stay awake?

In the end my secret was spilled for me. Cole, by virtue of his being a spirit, was able to sense my dreams. In truth he sensed a great deal more than that. My suffering drew him as ever it did, his inherent compassion driving him to be a balm to my wound. And so it was one night I was wrenched from the grasp of another nightmare to find myself perched precariously on the balcony outside of my room, a hairsbreadth from plummeting to my death, Cole’s hands on my waist as he frantically pulled me back.

I could hardly speak. What words left me were broken gibberish, convoluted by my terror and confusion. Cole spoke to me quietly, soothingly, begging me to remain awake while he went for help. I was trembling, numb, appalled by how close I’d come to inadvertently ending my own life. How long Cole was gone I don’t know, but when he returned it was with Solas in tow.

I was where Cole had left me, collapsed in front of the fire. Solas had knelt swiftly before me, bidding me look at him. He was speaking to Cole, disbelieving anger coating his every word.

“You knew and you did not tell me?”

“She did not want you to know. She did not want anyone to know.”

“She was suffering!”

“It was her suffering and she wanted to keep it that way. But it kept growing, wings unfurling, and now it won’t let her go.”

“You should have come to me, Cole!”

“It’s my f-fault,” I managed to stutter. “I t-thought it would pass.”

Solas’s expression was so severe that under any other circumstances I would have shrunk away from him. “You’ve been most foolish, Inquisitor.”

I ducked my head, unable to endure the reproach in his gaze. With three fingers beneath my chin he tilted my face upward again. He said, “Cole says you’ve been dreaming.”

“They’re not just dreams!” I clutched at his wrist, desperate, imploring him to understand. “Solas, these are more. And there is something else. It follows me when I’m awake. I see it always from the corner of my eye, in the shadows of a room. It never leaves me!”

“Ever since you returned from Adamant?”
“Yes!” He’d let his hand fall, extricating it from my grasp. I couldn’t read his expression as he regarded me and I began to panic, worried that he was thinking the same thing I had been thinking for weeks. “I am not insane. I’m not imagining this!”

“I have seen it too,” Cole chimed in unexpectedly. Both Solas and I looked at him in surprise. “Glimpses of it, at least. It looks like … like tiny, skittering things that run from the light.”

Even as rattled as I was it was easy to see the thunderous fury gathering in Solas’ eyes. “And you never thought to speak of it?”

“I thought—”

I interrupted Cole, giving voice to a question that had been lurking in the fringes of my mind for weeks, a question I’d been afraid to give consideration to. “Am I possessed?”

Solas rocked back on his heels, studying me. He raised one hand toward me, palm out, as though attempting to sense something. Abruptly he checked his movement, as though a sudden, unpleasant thought had occurred to him. His expression became grimmer still.

“It could be a possibility,” admitted after a long moment, “though it would be a highly improbable one. You are not a mage. You have no magical abilities to draw a demon’s attention.”

My left hand was resting in my lap. I turned it over, palm up, so that the Anchor was clearly visible. “But I do have this,” I said.

“I had not thought—” Solas said, and then broke off, his eyes upon the mark I bore. “There is only one way to be certain if a demon has attached itself to you, Inquisitor. I must see your dreams.”

“No. No! Solas, I cannot bear it again! Please,” I begged him, my words shrill with dread, “you don’t know what you’re asking me.”

His hands were on my shoulders, steadying me. “Inquisitor,” he said in a low, even voice, “There is no other way for me to know. Whatever happens, I will be there with you. You won’t be alone.”

“I can be there, too,” Cole chimed in.

“No, Cole. You said that when you came to help the Inquisitor tonight you found her prepared to leap from the balcony. I need you to remain here, to stop either of us if something like that should happen again.”

Even knowing Solas would be there, the knowledge of what horrific desecration awaited me in the depths of the nightmare was enough to drive me to my feet, to pace an agitated line from the hearth to my bed and back again. “I will not be able to sleep again tonight,” I said tersely.

“You will,” Solas said at my back. “I can make it so.”

I turned to face he and Cole both. Thinking of voluntarily plummeting back into that abyss made it hard for me to breathe, terror constricting my lungs in a relentless vise. The thought of living this way any longer, however, was terrible enough for me to relent.

“Very well,” I said. My voice wavered badly. “But please, Solas … please don’t let them take me again.”

“I will keep you safe, Inquisitor,” he replied softly, glancing at Cole. “We both will.”
And so it was.

The dream had not altered itself. I stood again in the Deep Roads, cavernous and dark. I did not want to move, but I knew that even if I remained still the darkspawn would come for me eventually. They always found me, regardless of whether I ran or walked or hid.

“Inquisitor.”

Solas’ voice startled me; I’d forgotten, in the transition between awareness to sleep, that he would be here. He was standing beside me, clad in his adventuring gear, staff in hand.

“What will happen?” he asked me.

“Darkspawn.”

“And then?”

I shook my head. How could I explain to him what I’d endured so many times now? The shame and the abject horror that had become so familiar to me, the absolute defilement and pollution of my body and soul?

“Inquisitor?” Solas approached me, laying a hand on my shoulder. He squeezed gently, a gesture meant to be comforting. But I could find no comfort here, not here, not when I knew what was imminent.

It took me more than one attempt to spit the words out, cloying and thick with loathing as they were. “They drag me away.”

“And?”

“They feed me their flesh.”

Solas inhaled sharply. “What else?”

But I shook my head again. I would not give voice to what else would be done to me. “You already know. Valta and Renn spoke of it.”

When he spoke next, horrified disbelief had crept into his voice. “And you—you’ve endured this every night? For how long?”

I rubbed a hand over my eyes, eyes that felt gritty from exhaustion. “I don’t know. It’s been weeks.”

“Inquisitor …”

The odd inflection in that one word prompted me to look at him. He looked stricken. “If you would have just come to me,” he said softly, “I would have done anything I could to help you. Why didn’t you?”

How could I reveal to him the reasons? How could I tell him that after the Fade, spurred by the malignant whispers that had dogged me there, I’d been so worried that I would fail the Inquisition that I felt I could no longer afford to show any sign of weakness? As he waited for my explanation, as I struggled to formulate a reply, a sound rose in the distance.

The darkspawn were coming.

Solas stepped forward, his staff held defensively out before him, assuming a stance I’d seen him take
hundreds of times before combat. The sounds became louder: the furious pattering of footsteps, the clamor of armor and weapons, the guttural vocal discord of the darkspawn as they descended upon us in force.

I watched as they spilled forth from hidden caverns and cracks in the rock face. As always, they were many and as always, they were varied: genlock, hurlock, shriek. I watched as they filled the corridor, watched as they surged toward me—

—watched as they halted when Solas stepped forward to confront them.

An eerie hush had fallen. I watched, astounded, as the horde that had savaged me night after night, fell back before Solas as he advanced first one step, and then another.

Despite every nerve in my body screaming at me to run away from the darkspawn, I moved closer. “How—?”

“It is a dream, Inquisitor. It is your dream. Because I am a trespasser here, I am able to insert some influence.”

I drew even with him, but jumped back when a hurlock at the vanguard fastened its foul gaze upon me, hunching its shoulders and lunging in my direction before jerking to a halt as though tethered by a leash.

“They will not hurt you,” Solas reassured me. “I can hold them.”

I crept forward again. “Is there—can you tell if there’s a demon?”

He did not answer me for several moments. “There is,” he said eventually. His voice had changed, becoming notably tense.

“Where? I cannot see it.”

There was another pause before he responded. “It is back there.” He gestured with a thrust of his chin. “It is attempting to disguise itself.”

He took a deep breath, and then another, as though preparing himself. Without warning he slammed his staff against the ground. I stumbled back as sudden flames erupted, a wall of fire horizontal to Solas and I that quickly moved forth. The confines of the Deep Roads were filled with the screams of dying darkspawn and the stench of burning flesh. With a deliberate tread Solas advanced, trailing the destruction of his arcane fire.

I saw it then, as the flames ravaged the last of the darkspawn that had gathered. It was a fear demon, hovering further down the stone corridor, well beyond the reach of the fire. Although it kept flickering in and out of my sight, I could recognize its shape, the six spider-like limbs attached to its back and the appendages that framed its head. It was not our first encounter with this type of demon, but something had to be different about it that it had been able to affect me the way it had.

Well ahead of me now, Solas began his attack. Every movement with his staff was precise, skilled, as he sent a barrage of fireballs hurtling toward the demon. His aim was true; a screech so loud it hurt my ears echoed throughout the cavern as the demon was forced to materialize. The creature floated nearer and the battle began in earnest.

I had always been fascinated by magic users in combat. I envied them their skill, their ability to manipulate energy and elements in order to defend or assault. Solas worked his magic with an easy grace, a familiarity that made it clear he loved his craft. The demon lunged; Solas disappeared only
to shape himself out of shadow several feet away. The demon sent a swarm of large spiders surging forth; Solas retaliated with another wave of fire. So intensely pitched was their struggle that I found myself creeping closer, entranced.

Solas suddenly looked in my direction. “Inquisitor!” he shouted.

I knew before I’d turned, knew as I felt their hands on my arms and my legs, their fingers twisting painfully into my hair. I was hoisted aloft among a horde of moving, writhing bodies, passed from one to another as they carried me back toward their lair. Already they were preparing as they ran, ripping and slicing off pieces of their flesh, tearing at my clothing, howling their infernal triumph.

We had tried to alter the nightmare, but it would not be diverted from its path. I’d heard myself screaming this way before. I’d cried out like this as they cast me down. I’d pleaded and sobbed as I was pinned to the ground, as rough hands grabbed my jaw and forced it open, as they crowded around me, so eager in their purpose—

But the blinding light that filled the cave I’d never witnessed before, and as it spilled over me, harsh and unrelenting, the hands holding me fell away. Shrieks erupted all around me, dying darkspawn stumbling over my body, falling on top of me.

And then between one heartbeat and the next, it was over.

“You are awake, Inquisitor.”

It was Solas’ voice. My eyes fluttered open. I was cradled in his lap, staring up at his face. My hands were clenched in the fabric of his shirt. My throat felt raw and scorched as it always did after I awoke from the nightmare, made so by the screams I’d been unable to contain. I could feel the wetness on my face from tears, could feel too the lingering sensation of darkspawn fingers on my face, my neck—

The dam burst. I wept, knowing only shame and guilt because the Inquisitor had come undone.

“Cole.” Solas said, a clear dismissal. It was several moments before he spoke again. “I am so sorry, Evelyn.”

His words surprised me enough that my sobs receded somewhat. My bewildered gaze met his own to find that his gray eyes had darkened with remorse. “We should have realized—I should have realized. The lure of the Anchor is potent, particularly so to the denizens of the Fade. When you walked physically through it, you likely attracted the attention of a great many of them. When it became apparent that you would escape, one of the more powerful demons took drastic measures. It attached itself to you by merit of the energy the Anchor emitted, clinging to you as an eldritch shadow as you passed from the Fade to this world. Its intent was to feed off your fear by haunting your every moment, waking or dreaming. Your fear sustained it as blood sustains a parasite. Ultimately it would have driven you to kill yourself, as you almost did earlier, by manipulating you through waking nightmare.”

I was still shaking and I knew he could feel it. I felt his fingers then, lightly grazing through my hair once, twice, a gesture meant to soothe. “I should have known the effect the Anchor would have in the Fade. Had I been there with you, I may have been able to sense what had happened. As it was, I knew you’d been changed by your trip through the Fade. I did not realize …”

I lifted a hand that quivered to wipe at the moisture on my face, trying not to recall everything I’d felt, night after night, in that dream. I knew the memory might fade with time, but it would always be there. It would never leave me.
“Inquisitor,” Solas said quietly, “Why didn’t you come to me?”

I moved, arranging myself into a sitting position beside him. His hand fell away. “I heard voices the entire time I was in the Fade,” I explained. My voice was thick and watery, the aftermath of my crying. “They told me I was unfit to lead the Inquisition and that I would fail to defeat Corypheus and close the Breach. That I was too weak to fill this role. That I would disappoint everyone around me.”

Solas understood immediately, his perception like that of no other. “And because nobody else seemed to be this badly influenced by the Fade, you worried that it was because you were somehow less than the rest of us.”

To hear it that baldly made me realize just how stupid I’d been. It stung. “Yes.” I said, and then to my dismay felt more tears welling up. I twisted my head away, trying to snuffle in silence and failing.

“Inquisitor,” he said, with what sounded like fondness but surely couldn’t be, “you’re a fool. There’s no better person to lead the Inquisition. You are a stronger woman than you realize.”

“Then how do you explain what just happened?” I demanded, looking back at him.

“An unfortunate incident, stemming from sheer bad luck.”

I was torn between laughing and crying even more. “W-What if it’s still there when I sleep? What if there are still darkspawn—”

“There aren’t. This I promise you.”

I took a deep, shuddering breath. “I am afraid to sleep.”

“Come here.”

He got to his feet and once standing, held his hand out to me. I gripped it, confused, and he pulled me to my feet. Still holding my hand he led me to the bed and gestured for me to sit on it. Releasing my hand, he sat down beside me, turning in my direction as he did so.

“Now. You will sleep, and I will watch over you. If anything happens, I can enter your dreams as easily as I did before.”

I wanted him to remain—Maker, but I wanted him to. I wanted to know I had a guardian beside me should the nightmare come to me again, wanted to know I had a savior ready to pull me from that hell. But—this seemed like something an Inquisitor should not need. The expression on my face seemed to tell him as much.

“This doesn’t make you weak, Evelyn.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re in my bedchamber and I’m in my nightclothes.”

My unexpected attempt at humor earned me a wry grin. “This is not the way I’d imagined it, but I suppose I will have to take what I can get.”

I laughed. It felt good to do so; I hadn’t had reason to for a long time. My smile faded and I held my hand out to him, intending to clasp his in a gesture of gratitude. He surprised me by reaching for me, pulling me into a sure yet hesitant embrace, as though he was not accustomed to such displays of affection.
“It pains me to know you suffered so,” he said, his breath ruffling strands of my hair. “You must promise me here and now that you will come to me if you are in distress, no matter the reason.”

“I promise,” I told him. I’d been rigid in his embrace, startled as I was, but I reached up with one hand and awkwardly patted his back. My own affection for him—clearly more developed and deeper than his was for me—was flooding back now that the threat of the nightmares was beginning to disperse. I could feel heat flooding my cheeks and so I began to pull away. He relinquished his hold and rearranged himself, settling into a sitting position against the headboard on the other side of the bed.

“Sleep, Inquisitor. You need it. I will remain here until you wake.”

I laid down, turning onto my side with my back to him, feeling weariness drag at my eyelids. By some manner of miracle, my thoughts as I succumbed at long last to sleep weren’t of the darkspawn, or the Deep Roads, or the demon that had leeched my life from me.

They were of the fact that I had felt, for the briefest of moments, Solas’ lips press against my brow.

.x.
When Boone next went through the Eluvian to visit Movda, she left the armlet behind. The old woman would have questions and comments that Boone wasn’t prepared to think on, let alone answer. It was the easiest option and a part of her was ashamed that she’d chosen it. There was a threshold to just how much her mind could tolerate in regard to surprises and changes. Four nights prior—the night Solas had gifted her the armlet—she had crossed that particular threshold.

And so, of course, there were more changes awaiting her at Movda’s farm. She found her friend in the yard, feeding exotic looking chickens that hadn’t been there just a few days before.

“A gift from His Royal Lordship,” Movda explained, scattering the last bits of grain in her hand. The new birds, secure in a re-purposed goat pen, ran amok in a frenzy to claim the last of the feed. “I thought perhaps this was your doing?”

“No,” Boone replied, suitably mystified. “Was there anything else?”

“Yes. Come.”

Boone followed her friend across the yard to the stable. In the back corner of one of the unused stalls was a stacked pile of bulging hessian sacks. “Grain,” Movda said, gesturing to them, “and seeds for every kind of vegetable under the sun. I don’t think most will even grow here, but he said to try it anyway. He said I might be surprised.”

“He? Solas was here?”

“Oh yes.” Movda leaned against the worn, faded planks of the stable wall. “He and a couple of his men. Brought it all through that mirror three days ago.” Movda frowned, peering closely at Boone. “You knew nothing about this?”

Boone shook her head. “And was this all he brought?”

Movda hummed, shaking her head. She pushed herself away from the wall and ambled out into the yard, turning to head through the compound’s gate with Boone at her heels. She came to a halt, pointing. “He brought that, too.”

There was a hobbled horse grazing several feet away. It was a draught breed, tall, muscled and broad. It was liver chestnut in color save for the white of its wide blaze and its feathered fetlocks. It wore no halter and turned its head to gaze upon the two women, large ears pricking forward. Movda whistled, low and sharp. The horse immediately plodded in their direction.

“A gelding. His Lordship said he’s to replace your mare.” The horse had stopped before them, dropping his big head to snuffle first at Boone’s pockets and then at Movda’s. Movda smoothed his long forelock before patting him on his thick neck.

“I call him Hob,” she said. “Obviously he didn’t come through the mirror, but one of His Lordship’s henchmen brought him later that day. I was told he’s broke to plow and safe to ride.”

Boone held her hand out for Hob to sniff. The long whiskers on his muzzle tickled her skin. She asked, “Did you call Solas His Lordship to his face?”

“His Royal Lordship,” Movda corrected. “And yes, I did. Repeatedly.”
Boone’s laugh sounded very much like a giggle. To stifle it she pressed her face against Hob’s neck, running her hand along his withers. His big sides heaved as he exhaled deeply and shifted his weight from one side to another. He’d turned his head; she could feel him lipping at the back of her dress as he continued his search for hidden edibles.

“He said this was all for recompense, for what had happened to me after the Breach.”

“Ah,” Boone said, suddenly understanding. She stepped away from the horse. “I gave him my first book. He knows.”

Movda said nothing as she considered Boone. Boone met her gaze evenly. She truly did believe she’d done no harm in letting Solas read the first of her chronicles. Finally Movda shrugged. “If you thought it best,” was all she said.

The two women made their way back inside the compound, leaving Hob to his grazing. Solas had been clever, Boone knew, in offering compensation to Movda in the form of useful things. Had he attempted to offer her money or some other type of wealth, the old woman would have turned him down flat. Solas had chosen to appeal to her sense of practicality rather than affront her pride, a strategy that had worked where most others would have failed.

“Stay and have lunch with me?” Movda asked. “Or do you have some kind of fancy dinner plans back with the elves?”

“I’ve a ball later tonight,” Boone said teasingly, elbowing her friend as they walked. “And yet another tomorrow.”

The look Movda slanted her was comically unamused. Laughing outright, Boone slung her arm over the older woman’s shoulders. “There’s nowhere I would rather be than right here.”

“I should just let the elves have you,” Movda grumbled, but snaked her arm around Boone’s waist anyway.

.x.

She’d found the city’s barracks by accident. Intent on discovering all of Era’Adahlen, Boone had taken to going for long walks, venturing further and further from her temporary home on each outing. She’d visited the market with Irithala and had been impressed by its size, as well as by the wide variety of goods available for purchase. What impressed her most, however, was that a great many of the merchants behind the stalls had been human. She’d engaged some of them in conversation, asking with frank curiosity how they liked doing business in Era’Adahlen. The answer was always the same: they were treated fairly in the Elvhen city and it had proven a prosperous destination worth revisiting.

The day she found the barracks, she was out alone. Irithala, delighted with Solas’ gift of the armlet, had decided to supplement Boone’s existing wardrobe with clothing that had two full sleeves instead of one and a half. She’d declined a walk that day, eager to finish her tailoring. It had begun snowing in late morning, heavy flakes dusting whatever surfaces they landed upon. Boone had worn a lined cloak over her dress—a new purple creation of Irithala’s with two sleeves to accommodate the magical arm—and walked with her hood pulled up and her hands tucked in her pockets for warmth. Her wandering was rather aimless until she heard raised voices amid the unmistakable sounds of combat. Curiosity firmly piqued, she altered her course in order to find the source of the commotion.

What she found was a huge cobblestone courtyard with a fenced perimeter. Mock battles were being waged here amid the falling snow, and Boone slowed to watch as Elvhen in burnished armor lunged,
feinted and dodged in synchronized drills as their commanders shouted orders. Axes struck shields and cross-guards turned aside daggers as the soldiers executed each movement with military precision. Something about their armor nettled Boone. She drifted closer until she reached the fence, crossing her arms and resting them on the top rail. She studied the closest of the soldiers, running a keen eye over their armaments. Recognition came to her suddenly—their armor was very similar, if not identical, to the armor worn by the ancient Elvhen at the Temple of Mythal. Choosing a design that heralded from the age when the Elvhen were the greatest civilization in Thedas was a smart choice on behalf of the Elvhenan. It presented a bold statement: the elves of Thedas had changed. They were no longer fodder—they were now a force to be reckoned with.

Boone pushed away from the fence and continued to walk. The snow continued to fall, a little heavier now. Beyond the battling troops, on the far side of the courtyard, some other type of activity was taking place. She followed the line of the fence, rounding a corner, until she was able to clearly see what was happening. She slowed as her eyes fell upon a line of Elvhen archers. They were all at full draw, and with the same regimented precision she’d seen with the other soldiers, let their arrows fly. As the projectiles struck their targets within split seconds of each other, the archers were already nocking their next arrows, every movement fluid and swift.

Boone had always loved the grace intrinsic to archery. There was something in the lines of an archer’s stance that made her think of an ancient deity engaging in the hunt with all the creatures of the world as quarry. There was a timelessness to the bow, an elegance that other weapons lacked. It was the reason she’d gravitated to it in her youth as first a hobby and then, after receiving the Anchor, as a method of survival. It was also something she had missed terribly after losing her arm, leaving her feeling entirely defenseless, bereft of an ability she hadn’t realized she relied on so heavily.

Leaning against top rail of the fence, Boone settled in to watch as the archers continued to practice. They varied their exercises, experimenting with different stances and grips. As they progressed, several of them took notice of Boone’s observation. Some sent bemused glances her way, which she always returned with a friendly smile. She wasn’t alone as a spectator; numerous passersby stopped to watch the soldiers go through their combat practice. She was aware of the other watchers the way she was aware of the clouds in the sky—they passed by, and she kept watching.

“Evelyn.”

She inhaled quickly and deeply at the sound of Solas’ voice; it was an instinctual reaction, one she had no control over. Arms still folded on the rail fence, she turned her head to see him approaching. An Elvhen man garbed in the same style armor as the soldiers she’d been observing walked beside him.

She nodded at them both, a wordless greeting. Solas’ cloak was long and thick, made entirely of wolf pelt. It gave him an air of ancient sovereignty and she found herself thinking that he would look completely natural with a heavy silver crown adorning his head—winter’s king, surveying his lands with impunity.

“You were right,” she said as they neared. “Winter in Era’Adahlen is beautiful.”

“I am happy you think so.” Solas’ voice was pleasant, his expression warm. “And so you have found our training grounds. Tell me, what do you think of our archers?”

Boone turned her head again so that she could see the bowmen. “They are disciplined. Precise. No movement is wasted.”

“It is one thing to do as they do now, without opponents, without the chaos of battle. Do you think
they would do as well in conflict?”

Boone’s brow furrowed a little in confusion. It was an odd question for him to ask. “There is really no way of knowing until they’re in the thick of it.”

Solas looked satisfied. “Precisely. Do you still not agree, Abelas?”

Boone’s startled gaze snapped to the man standing at Solas’ side. His odd golden eyes, somehow commanding even without a hint of expression in them, met her own. He tipped his head briefly in her direction. “Andaran atish’an, Inquisitor.”

She suspected Solas was enjoying her surprise at seeing one of the Elvhen Sentinels here. It made sense to her now why the stances and rhythms of the archers had seemed vaguely familiar; she’d seen it all before, years ago, in the Temple of Mythal. “These are your men, then?” she asked Abelas.

“Some. Those that chose to swear fealty to Fen’Harel. The rest are recruits trained in our ways.”

The emphasis he put on “our” made it clear that he spoke of training practices from thousands of years prior, when the Evanuris had ruled and Mythal had still been alive. Spurred on by curiosity, she asked, “And those that did not swear fealty?”

Abelas had been watching the soldiers. As she spoke his eyes flicked back to her. It was unnerving, how very little she could read in his face. She’d thought Solas adroit at masking what he was thinking, but trying to gain insight into Abelas was like attempting to peer inside a block of stone.

“Ghilan’him banal’vhen.” he said in response to her question. His voice was stony, his words clipped, and though she didn’t understand what he’d said the implication was clear: he disapproved greatly of those that had not followed Fen’Harel.

She had seen the fleeting, mildly reproving side-eye Solas had given Abelas. Turning his attention back to her, he explained, “Upon reforming the Elvhenan, Abelas agreed to command our forces.”

“It appears you have done well,” she said to the Sentinel. “I have never seen such exactness or commitment, not even within the Inquisition’s army.”

“Ma serannas.” Abelas inclined his head to her again. “There is much to do and the day runs late. Dareth shiral, Inquisitor.” He spoke briefly to Solas in Elvhen, who replied with only one word, before turning and moving away with brisk strides.

Solas stepped closer to Boone, mirroring her stance by leaning his elbows on the fence. His head was bare and he seemed not to mind the heavy snowflakes that landed upon it, melting instantly before running in thin rivulets down his skin.

“Abelas is not one for conversation,” he told her, “not even among his own kind.”

“I can understand that,” she replied. “He trained all of these people?”

“He and the other Sentinels, yes. After so long spent guarding Mythal’s temple, such regimented activity was all they knew. I think it helped them adjust to life outside to teach others the skills they had spent centuries honing.”

“Were there many of them? The Sentinels?”

“ Barely a hundred. And as he said, some did not wish to share our future.”
“What happened to them?”

Solas shook his head. “I do not know. They deserved the freedom to choose their own paths after being bound to Mythal’s will for so long. Wherever they are, whatever they have chosen to do, I hope they have found peace.”

They said nothing for a while, both observing the archers as they ran through drill after drill. The snowfall had increased, the air filled with gently falling white wisps. She tilted her head back to look skyward, smiling a little as smaller flakes alighted upon her lashes. She blinked them away and turned her head to look at Solas. He was regarding her with an intensity that reminded her so strongly of the night he’d kissed her palm that she felt her heart flutter momentarily in her chest.

To chase the moment away, so laden with their mutual unspeakable craving as it was, she held her artificial hand out, palm up. “It is remarkable,” she said, striving for an even tone that would not betray her thoughts, “how I can feel everything with something that is not true flesh.”

“That was my intent,” he said. He too was watching as snowflakes landed upon her hand, as she flexed her fingers and tilted her palm so the moisture could drip away. “And I am most pleased I succeeded.”

Within the training arena, those in command had called a halt for the day. The soldiers began leaving, heading toward the barracks in groups. Boone pushed away from the fence, feeling the stirrings of hunger; she had not eaten much for breakfast and had skipped a midday meal. On the verge of telling Solas she was about to leave, she instead remained silent as he began to speak.

“It has been a very long time since I have seen you look as content as you did when I first saw you here, watching the archers.”

She tilted her head. “And?”

“And I wondered, what was it you were thinking of?”

“A bow,” she replied. “My bow. The way it used to feel in my hands. The tension of the string, the ache in my shoulder from pulling it, the way the arrow felt as I slid it through my fingers. I was remembering.”

“You miss it.”

“Every day.” she said quietly.

She watched guilt flit over his face, fleeting and faint, and read the apology in his eyes. She shook her head. Today was not for the tethers of regret that bound them both. “I am hungry. I think I’m going to return to my rooms.”

He held up a hand to stall her. “There is something I would like to ask you.”

“And that is?”

“First, may I escort you back?”

She nodded and together they began heading back across the city, toward her residence and the keep. She waited for him to phrase his question, wondering why such a small, insignificant thing could cause her to feel ripples of anxiety.

“There is to be a dinner,” he said as they walked, “a formal one. It will be the first of its kind. All the
leaders within the Elvhenan will be there, the Keepers within this city and those who have chosen to
remain without. Its success is, needless to say, paramount. There is great potential for renewed unity
within our nation and I hope to use this dinner to that end.”

Boone knew what he was going to ask and desperately did not want him to. He went on, unaware of
her dread. “I had hoped, in time, that you would feel at home here. I meant to introduce you to those
I trust most, to those most influential among our people. I have been unable to for myriad reasons that
keep me busy day after day. I would like to remedy this. It would please me a great deal, Evelyn, if
you would accompany me to this feast.”

No, oh no. The thought of appearing at a formal event meant for the heads of the Elvhen state made
her feel more than a little nauseous. She hadn’t liked those types of situations as Inquisitor; now, as
she was, the concept was one she abhorred. She’d gotten used to the mantle of anonymity, of being
able to live her life without drawing attention, without anyone questioning who she was. To appear
at an Elvhen affair, so obviously human (and with a magical arm, nonetheless) meant she would
attract intrigue and speculation the way honey attracted bears.

“I know you will be uncomfortable,” Solas said, able to read her unease in her expression and
striving to placate it. “And I know it will be difficult for you. But I believe, if you were to only give it
a chance, that you might find the experience an enlightening — if not entertaining — one.”

“I’m not …” she said, and faltered because there were just so many ways she could end that
sentence.

“Sathan, Evelyn. Please. Let me show you what I have built, what my people have built. I wish for
you to better understand this, all of this.” He swept an arm out to indicate the whole of the city, the
whole of his people.

Ah, shit. There was no way she could refuse now. “Very well,” she sighed with such reluctance that
she could feel it weighing down her every step as though there were anchors in her heels. “When?”

“Eight days hence.”

It was too soon. She’d hoped — unrealistically — the answer would have been months or even
years. “Very well,” she repeated glumly, and pretended not to notice the wide, grateful smile he
flashed in her direction.

.x.

Eight days did not pass nearly slow enough for Boone’s liking.

She crammed those days full of activity in an attempt to keep from thinking about the dinner and the
fact that she’d agreed to attend it. She spent many hours with Movda. She spent hours watching the
archers train. She spent even more time reading, throwing herself into nearly every book she found in
the keep’s library. Despite her persistent attempts to drown out the doubts and anxieties she had
about the formal feast, they always remained, lurking on the very periphery of her thoughts. She
spent a great deal of time with Irithala as well, who had been incapable of hiding her excitement after
learning that Boone was to attend the event.

“Oh, Hahren’asha!” she exclaimed. “How thrilling! I wish that I could be there to see it all.”

“You are most welcome to attend in my place,” Boone said dryly.

“Nonsense! And you’ll need something new to wear!”
“Don’t go to any tro —”

“Nonsense!” the Elvhen woman repeated emphatically. “It won’t be any trouble at all. Oh, I’ve already got ideas — how do you feel about blue?”

Boone, laughing, had waved aside the question. “Make it whatever color you like, however you like. My trust in you is absolute. But, Irithala, you know you don’t have to do this?”

Irithala sunny smile was nearly luminescent enough to light the room. “I know I don’t have to, but I want to.”

“Well, thank you,” Boone said, grinning back at the girl. It was nice to know that at least someone would get enjoyment out of this entire ordeal.

.x.

Irithala did not disappoint. The gown she created for the formal dinner was indeed blue, a dark shade that reminded Boone of the waters of Lake Calenhad when seen from afar. It was similar in design to some of the others she had created, the fabric gathering just below the breasts to fall in straight, full lines to the floor. The neckline was modestly curved, the sleeves long and dagged. The cuffs and hem bore embroidery in a flowing, delicate silver pattern. As with the other gown, it fit Boone perfectly and despite her intense reluctance to attend the dinner or be seen by those she did not know, she had to admit that Irithala’s creation flattered her in every way.

“This design,” Boone had said after trying it on for the first time. “You’ve used it with some of the other dresses. I’ve never seen it before, though. How did you think of it?”

“The High Keeper described it to me,” Irithala explained. “Once, when I asked him what the clothing had been like so long ago, when he was young. He said this was the way the noble ladies dressed.”

“I see.” was all Boone had said, unsure of how she felt to be wearing a dress that mirrored the style of the Elvhen women from Solas’ youth.

As before, Irithala had insisted on doing Boone’s hair for the event. Boone had sat compliant and silent with unease as Irithala deftly braided, twisted, and pinned her tresses, chattering excitedly all the while. Boone had nodded her head and smiled absentely in response, but was unable to muster up matching enthusiasm. Though it had been ten years, though she had managed to successfully sink into obscurity, she was still afraid that some among the Elvhen at the dinner might recognize her for who she really was. And what would happen then?

Despite her reservations, time marched inexorably on until she stood at the top of a grand staircase that descended to a large landing, which in turn led to the massive dining hall of Enansal Vir. She could hear the soft roar of many assembled voices and suddenly her lungs felt constricted at the knowledge that she was so close to so many. Her reluctance to proceed down the stairs was so extreme that she unconsciously backed a step. I could go, she found herself thinking, mentally retracing her path away from here, no longer trying to subdue the urge to bolt headlong after Irithala, who had escorted her this far. I could go and he could not stop me. He would not force me back. Would he?

No, she knew. He wouldn’t. Solas was no longer acting on his own imperative, by his own directives. He was the face of the new Elvhenan and was beholden to his people by the duties and expectations that came with the mantle of leadership. He could entreat her to stay, could implore her
to return, but he could not force her, not without losing face. Driven by that knowledge, Boone found herself retreating another step, and then another, and then another —

And then she saw him, stepping out from a doorway onto the landing at the bottom of the stairs. His attention was on the crowd assembled below him; for several brief instants he was oblivious to Boone. She found she could not tear her eyes from him — found, more disconcertingly, that she did not want to. She had never before seen him garbed thus, in fine cloth of gold and black augmented by strategic pieces of golden armor. Gone was the wolf pelt, the emblem of Fen’Harel; over that shoulder was draped a black cape edged in gold. He looked so unlike what she was used to, disparate from his usual self, projecting complete and undeniable authority.

*That is not the man I know.*

That thought struck her as an arrow might and she felt irrational panic then, clutching at her lungs as she took a breath, squeezing at her throat as she swallowed hard. She could still go, could flee from this place where she fervently did not want to be, could return to her rooms and spend the night pacing, confused and distraught and strangely afraid —

As though sensing her scattered thoughts, Solas turned his head to see her standing above him. A smile lit his face, a smile of such pleasure and warmth that Boone could not help but smile back despite all of her anxious turmoil. He turned to face her, his expectation that she proceed down the stairs to join him clear. *I cannot*, she wanted to tell him. *I cannot do this.* But her body disagreed and she found herself carefully descending the steps, the skirt of her gown lifted by her artificial hand to avoid treading on the hem.

She arrived at the landing and arm's length from him, unwilling to draw closer because as it was, she was shielded from the dining hall by a large stone pillar. The noise of the crowd was even more audible now, the hum having become distinct voices all speaking at once.

Solas spoke. “You look …” he paused, as though uncharacteristically unable to secure the words he wanted. There was such appreciation in his gaze that Boone felt her cheeks flush. “You *are* lovely, Evelyn.”

It was the same compliment he had paid her the night of their private dinner, but there was a different weight to those words now, a deeper meaning with subtly exposed intent. She opened her mouth to divert the compliment, but knowing what her reaction would be he quickly intervened, smiling again as he did so. “And it is not all due to Irithala’s work. She is talented, yes, but even she cannot be credited for this. It is entirely you.”

The heat in her face was such that Boone was sure that it was blazing red, ready to burst into flame. She wanted to reply in kind, with artful phrases and sophisticated compliments. Instead, all she managed was a husky, “Thank you.”

He nodded once in response before holding out his arm. There could be no turning back for her now, not now, and so with small, stiff steps she moved forward and slid her magical arm through his.

She was exposed in that moment to the eyes of the crowd and could feel their attention, knew that people were taking note of High Keeper Fen’Harel and his escort. She could not bring herself to look down at them and desperately held Solas’ gaze, seeking reassurance and comfort, seeking the promise that it would be all right. What she read in their blue-gray depths was nothing of that nature. Instead she found only the stark, unmistakable light of apology.

*What is it?* She wanted to ask, but instead her gaze darted forward, to the dining hall and those assembled there. Her eyes roamed over faces, at first unseeing and then widening as realization
sundered her. These were not all Elvhen gathered here, no — some were human. Many were human. As though from underwater, her vision swimming as true comprehension dawned, she could make out the insignias and coats of arms on their clothing, could recognize the standards and banners arranged at the back of the hall. They were the emblems of nobility from Ferelden, from the Free Marches, from Orlais. She saw the banner crown of the Imperium, saw the unmistakable heraldry of Par Vollen —

She tried to pull away. Solas twined his fingers with hers, pinning her arm against his side with her own. She looked at him, wide-eyed, feeling the flush drain swiftly from her face and leaving behind pale disbelief and betrayal.

She could say only, “You lied.”

“Yes.” He had turned to face her, so that he could hide his face from the crowd below. Still held by him, she could only do the same. His eyes were solemn upon hers, utterly remorseful but unrelenting in their purpose. “I had to. I had intended that we would reach this moment together, willingly, but too much has happened too quickly. I could not ease you into it. I had no other choice.”

“All of this,” she said with tongue and voice that felt numb, “all of this — at the coast, bringing me here … just to use me again?”

It was if she had wounded him somehow with those words; she watched as he winced, but that pain could not be genuine. He could no longer be genuine. “Evelyn,” he entreated softly, “I would not have done this if there had been any other option. There must be peace between the Elvhen and the rest of Thedas. I needed to find some way to prove there could be unity between us all. I needed you.”

“You needed the Inquisitor!” she spat. She pulled at his grip. He held her fast, with the same strength she used now to cling to her already unraveling composure, to the shambles of her dignity. “Have you forgotten I abandoned them? They will not care!”

He stepped closer. “They will. Despite what you think, you were always one of their own. Some never lost hope for you. Some would support you still.”

She stopped moving. Her voice had dulled. “Let me go.”

“I cannot.”

She could no longer dissemble, watching him through eyes that brimmed with tears, with a face that conveyed only the most profound sorrow and disappointment. His voice, when he spoke next, cracked on the first words. “They have already seen you. Some have already recognized you. It will take only minutes before they all know who you are. Tensions already run too deep between my people and yours — if you run from here, if you run from me, what conclusion do you think they will reach? Some are already looking for the slightest provocation to attack the Elvhenan and if they see a human woman — the Inquisitor — fleeing from me, they will react.”

And there it was, his most cleverest of snares. It was also the truest, she knew. It was why he had done what he had done so carefully, so intricately. Yes, she could fight against him now, she could scream at him and strike him as she so fiercely wanted to do, but in doing so she would strike a match beneath the bone dry kindling of strain, tension and resentment that filled the dining hall. Her struggle would become theirs. Blades would be drawn. Blood would spill. And the world would again be at war because of her.

She had not thought it possible for any and all of her affection toward him to become polluted so
quickly and thoroughly. She knew now it was possible, knew that Solas, still gazing into her eyes, had just realized it too.

“Was I ever in danger?” she asked harshly, “or was that attack and that arrow your doing as well?”

Again, that wince flickering over his face, as though he actually could feel, as though he could actually understand what despair and tumult he was wreaking upon her now. “I swear to you, the Mien’Harel are a very real threat. I had hoped that I had found you first, but that day …”

That day. The day he had appeared at the coast, strode back into her life without qualm. His fingers, twined with hers, were squeezing tightly and she wondered, was he even aware of that movement? Was he trying to calm her through touch or was it an unconscious thing, a reflex? For a moment she wanted to fight him, to throw herself at him and rake the flesh from his face with her nails, to eviscerate him as she should have done ten years ago. Let them all burn, she thought callously, let them war. Let them tear each other apart. It is all they’ve ever done, it is all they’ll ever do. It’s what we all live for.

He read her thoughts in the furious, taut lines of her face. His fingers meshed with hers tightened even more. “You cannot,” he whispered. To Boone in that moment it sounded something like a plea.

And why not?

But she already knew the answer, had known it all along. She couldn’t because she had already stepped aside once and had spent the decade following regretting it so intensely that it had become a permanent part of her, an unforgivable blemish upon her very soul. To atone she had punished herself by finding those that had suffered most and recording every word of their sorrow, with those same words etching themselves forever upon her mind — perhaps even her spirit — so that her guilt and shame would accompany her into the next life. She could not let others suffer thus again, and more selfishly, she could not bear to suffer like that again either.

“I cannot,” she agreed, looking away from him. She turned again, schooling her expression until it was aloof, unreadable. She fixed her eyes forward, out above the throng of people - human, Elvhen, Qunari — assembled at the bottom of the final grand staircase. She would survive this night, of course. She would spend most of it screaming inside, railing against both Fate and Solas for putting her here, but she would survive it. But a part of her, she knew, was already lost, had been lost the moment she’d realized Solas’ game.

“Your guests await,” she said in a voice both distant and cold. “Let us join them, Fen’Harel.”

.x.
Confidante, unknowing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Evelyn,

There was a time, years ago, when I glimpsed you seated at a desk in the chantry at Haven, writing in a small book. I'd asked you what you were writing and you told me it was the account of the day. You told me you always recorded events that you thought were important. When I inquired why, your reply was that memories changed over time, but words written did not. In the future, you wanted to be able to read over what you had written and remember it all as it truly had happened, instead of how your altered memories may present it.

I thought often on your response. I've known, better than almost anyone, how time can change perceptions and recollections. I watched as, throughout your endeavors as Inquisitor, you dutifully and often passionately scribed the accounts of our trials. I know that not everything you wrote revolved around the Inquisition; you told me as much, revealing that the small book you carried with you always was also your diary, where you wrote your innermost thoughts, your dreams, your fears, your aspirations. It seemed to help quiet your anxieties and your doubts. Eventually, beset by my own unexpected demons, I decided to try your methods. I began to write as you did, words that I could never say aloud, words better read than heard.

As time progressed, as I grew to know you better, I found myself besieged by revelations I never thought to have. I grew to adulthood in a world where the human lifespan was a mere flicker of a candle’s flame compared to the eternal blaze of Elven lives. To my kind, your people were always scurrying, always tinkering, striving to do the most in lives that, to us, seemed tragically short. After reawakening, in that span of time before the Breach came to be, I found that the world had changed so drastically in so many ways that I knew only true and utter despair. The elves were now mortal and populated Thedas as specters, piteous semblances of what they once were. I was to blame for this. I had broken my people. I had been responsible for their fall from the greatest civilization ever known into a race that dwelt in relative obscurity. The Dalish had tried with misguided attempts and intentions to immortalize their ancestry but had ultimately failed. Of the ancient Elven, only ghosts remained.

I will admit to being prejudiced toward your people when we first met. I was still clinging to the world I had left behind — the world I had destroyed. I was not willing to see that humans had risen to such lofty heights while the elves had been subjugated or partitioned away or driven to lead a nomadic life. I was not willing to believe that a human, any human, would be capable of changing my way of thinking.

And then I met you.

Understand that at first I felt no guilt knowing you had been the recipient of the Anchor Corypheus had intended to bestow upon himself. My original plan had been denied, but a chance for its success still existed in you. Once Corypheus was dealt with I would return my full attention to my efforts to remove the Veil from the world, and originally I believed that nothing would inhibit my focus. But you — you, a human woman, thrown unwittingly and unwillingly into turmoil greater than Thedas had ever known — you challenged my beliefs. Through word and action you made me question myself, question my choices, and even question my intentions. I had always assumed the greatest danger to my plans would be the actual task of tearing apart the Veil. I had not anticipated that the greatest danger would be you.
You were not perfect and at first all I saw were your flaws, as I did in every human. You were mortal and thus inherently frail. You were minor nobility, born into privilege while all around you the elves of this world suffered. You were too cautious, always considering every angle with painstaking attention before going to action. You were too quiet, letting others talk over you instead of using your own voice — a voice that, as Inquisitor, had the very real power to shape the world. You were too often frightened, afraid of failing, afraid of offending, afraid too of succeeding, for what vague fate awaited you once Corypheus was gone?

Time passed. And slowly, reluctantly, I began to view you as something beyond just human. You were intelligent, with a hunger for knowledge as insatiable of my own. You were considerate, showing a greater empathy than I had ever expected. There was a bravery in you as well, which you constantly denied to yourself, which you will deny even now. But you were brave, Evelyn, to do what you did day after day, saddled with a magic you did not understand or want, a magic that would eventually kill you.

My magic.

In the dream we shared of Haven, you kissed me. I pushed you from me and watched as humiliation and hurt filled your eyes. In truth, it was all I could do not to pull you back to me. That night I realized that what I felt for you was not mere fondness — no, it had become something more than that, something substantial ... something unwanted. In the future I had planned, there was no room for emotional attachment — romance would be a peril I could not chance. I had to focus on what mattered most to me: the restoration of the Elvhen to what they had once been.

It hurt me to hurt you. You did not understand then and you will not understand now what I have felt, what I have known. You will never know the guilt of being the one that doomed your own people, to know that you and you alone were responsible for an act tantamount to genocide. I had stripped immortality from the Elvhen. I had laid waste to their world. I was alone, the last of my kind, and I missed my people, my world so much that it was an agony greater than any I have ever known. It was as constant and familiar to me as breathing. It still is.

These are not excuses for what I have done. I will make none for those choices. We are what we are, and I am a man of my people. For a very long time, I existed only to see them restored. And now ...

And now you are here, in Era’Adahlen. You are again real to me, a physical being instead of the memory I have harbored for so long. For years I have written my innermost thoughts and hopes. I have written them to you, Evelyn. You had your diary; I have letters, letters I could not show you, letters you will never see. Like you, I wanted to retain the memories of all that had happened, but more importantly I wanted to ensure that my recollections of you, all of them, were recorded as clearly and thoroughly as possible. I came to care for you during your time as Inquisitor, though I knew all along that to pursue those feelings would be folly for us both. When the time came I would leave the Inquisition in order to advance my plans, and in doing so I would leave you. In writing the letters I would ensure that in some fashion, I would have you with me always.

I cannot adequately explain all that I have come to regret in my lifetime. There are too many things. Among those I regret most are the ways I have used you. You have changed so much. You are another woman, a different woman, filled with sorrow and fury, shackled by shame. You were never one for easy laughter and ready smiles, but you were capable of happiness back then. When I found you again, I feared that that was no longer true. Your true self was shrouded from view, hidden away so deeply that I wondered if she could ever truly be found again. In recent weeks I have seen hints that lead me to believe that there is still hope, and that is why it pains me so much that I must act now, like this, in order to ensure that my people — and yours — remain safe.
Ir abelas, vhenan. Forgive me for what I must do.

.x.

Chapter End Notes

For whatever reason, it's a lot easier to write these diary chapters than it is to write the others. From this point on the story becomes heavy and I view the upcoming chapters with a mix of dread and nervousness. This will likely be the last chapter until after Christmas/new year.

I want to thank all of you for your support and your feedback that you've given me along the way. You bolster my resolve with every comment/kudos/message you send. I'd like to wish you all a wonderful holiday season - all the best to you and yours!
Facade for an audience

“You must eat something.”

Solas’ voice was an undertone, meant to be heard only by her. His precaution was wasted. The clamor of voices in the dining hall ensured that nobody would have heard him anyway.

“Must I.” Boone’s voice was a flat monotone. She didn’t look at him — had not looked at him, in fact, since taking her seat at his side. She was aware of the constant glances he sent her way, just as she was aware of the many, many glances of those dining below. She ignored them all, as best she was able, keeping her own gaze fixed directly in front of her, fastened upon a pennant hanging from the far wall which bore the emblem of Tantervale.

The round plate on the table before her was full of an impressive variety of food. She had not touched it and did not intend to. Even had she an appetite, she knew that whatever she swallowed would immediately turn to lead in her stomach, a manifestation of her current chaotic state of mind, making her feel even more ill than she currently did. She had not touched her utensils or the goblets containing wine and water. Instead she sat as though carved from wood, her back straight, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

Would that I was stone, she thought. Would that I were impervious, would that none of this mattered …

And indeed, for a fleeting moment she thought of provoking Solas, of grabbing her knife and stabbing him with it so that he would counterattack, so that his eyes would flare and he would use his magic to turn her to stone as he had with so many Qunari, as he had with the Viddasala. It would not arrive at that outcome, she knew — no, any attack she made on him would be too swiftly deflected, too easily blurred in the minds of those gathered at the rows of tables below. Even were she to unleash all her bitter rage upon Fen’Harel, it would account for nothing.

And so she endured the feast, motionless and silent. Never once did her eyes stray from the emblem of the royal house of Tantervale. To do so would mean she would see them watching her, studying her, openly wondering at her presence here. To do so would invite the persecution she had avoided for so long. On her right Solas dined and conversed with the Elvhen leader seated on his other side with the easy grace of a sovereign. On her left was an older Elvhen man, nearly as quiet as she, who had only acknowledged her with a faint smile and a nod when she and Solas had arrived to take their seats. Rigid with constrained fury and hurt, aware of every movement Solas made, of every morsel he consumed and every sip he took from his goblet, Boone could do nothing but wait for an eventuality she could not know but most certainly feared.

That fear was realized when most had finished dining, when all the commotion of the diners became a post-meal susurrus. Solas, after taking a final fortifying draught from his goblet, pushed his chair away from the table and stood. Immediately an intense stillness fell.

When first Boone had been announced upon entering the hall, when first she’d stepped down from the stairs, the commotion had been nearly ear-splitting. She’d been assailed by shouts of disbelief and outrage, by cries of utter bewilderment, by pleas. Throughout it all, as Solas escorted her across the hall, she’d looked only directly in front of her, terrified of making eye contact with anyone. The herald, still standing at the landing at the top of the stairs, had called repeatedly for order and eventually, once Solas and Boone were seated at the main dais, the ruckus had dimmed to a dull roar. Solas had lifted one hand to gain attention, and once he had it, had said only: “All will be explained.”
And with that succinct statement, the feast had begun.

Now Solas was about to deliver on his promise. The attention of every single individual in the hall was riveted upon him. Despite that, Solas projected an air of absolute assurance, as though commanding the attention of so many was an every day occurrence. Had circumstances been different, Boone would have marveled at the many faces of Fen’Harel. As it was, she viewed them now with a persistently growing sense of dread.

“I thank you all for attending,” Solas began. His voice carried clearly across the large space, amplified by the fact that nobody else dared speak or even whisper. “As you well know, this is something of a momentous occasion. It is the first time many of you have set foot inside of this city, the first time many of you have even seen it. There are reasons, numerous and justified, as to why you would not have come. Those are reasons I hope you realize I do understand. And it is those reasons that have led to this feast and these negotiations, so that the our people may begin to address the injustices both sides have suffered.”

A low murmur began at his choice of words. Boone, looking out over the crowd, took note of displeased, sober expressions she saw. Solas went on, “It is also past time that I make apologies for what I have wrought, for my actions and for the unforgivable consequences. I stand before you now, a man responsible for chaos and war, responsible too for death and loss. What I did, I did for love of my people, a people that existed for too long as memory and shadow, a people that ultimately I had destroyed.”

“I will not beg your forgiveness. I know that my crimes are beyond that. But I will ask you, each and every one of you, to think upon what you would have done to save your race, to restore Qunari and human if they had been as doomed as the Elvhen. The truth most of you will never admit aloud, especially not to me, but it is there for all of you. It is a fact that will never leave you, just as it never left me. I carry it — and all the consequences attached to it — with me always. It is as much a part of me as my soul.”

The silence within the dining hall was now absolute. Had a strand of hair fallen from someone’s head to the floor, Boone was almost certain that it would be heard. Solas was silent a moment, his steady, commanding gaze encompassing the crowd. Despite their prolific reluctance and resentment and suspicion he held them all in his thrall by merit of his voice, by the rhythm of his words.

“My reasons for destroying the Veil are by now tired stories, familiar and over-told. I will not insult any of you by repeating them now. What I invited you here to address — what we must reach an accord over — is the matter of the Mien’Harel. Their attacks have become more coordinated and more frequent, and they do not discriminate between human or elvhen settlements. There is no point in my recounting the number of dead left in their wake; it is something you already know, just as you already know that steps must be taken to defeat them before they continue with their attacks. This is why we are all here. It is my hope that together, despite our past differences and despite whatever current disputes we may have, we can work toward formulating a plan in order to contend with the Mien’Harel.”

His last words were met again with silence. And then, shouted from a face Boone could not distinguish in the crowd: “They are your people, Fen’Harel!”

“They are not,” he replied evenly. “They ceased to be part of the Elvhenan when they chose to wage war not only on their own people, but yours as well.”

“You’ve proven the extent of your power,” rose another voice, from a graying, bearded man seated near the main dais. “What could possibly prevent you from dealing with them on your own?”
Boone was sitting bolt upright now, her fingers clenching the edge of the table, riveted by the line of inquisition, by the questions she’d been harboring herself for a long while. The answer to this particular inquiry he had given her the day he’d brought her to Era’Adahlen, though she was more than certain that it had only been a partial answer.

“Those that lead them still possess lingering remnants of the abilities available to them before I banished them beyond the Veil. Whatever magic they still possess makes them impervious to any arcane means I have of tracking them. The only efficient method of locating them is through tracking parties and scouts, and while our agents have been attempting to do just that, we lack the numbers to be effective.”

Another yelled question from the crowd: “What proof have you that these elves are attacking their own people?”

“Bodies.” Solas replied grimly. “The corpses of those the Mien’Harel saw fit to ruthlessly murder. Families despairing over the loss of loved ones. Homesteads burnt to the ground, livestock savagely slaughtered and mutilated. Elvhen words painted in elvhen blood on trees decrying our nation and all it stands for.”

A man stood near the back of the room, human, dark-haired and mustached. “Your words are pretty,” he called out, “but they are still just words. You admit your crimes but stand before us unpunished, and now you think to ask for our aid? What reason have we, any of us, to lend you our aid?”

“For peace. For a cessation of the hostilities that have plagued Ferelden these past long years.”

The mustached man was still standing, arms folded across his chest. “And what if we don’t want peace with the elves?”

“My Lord Hannendall.” Solas’ voice had changed somewhat. As close as she was to him, Boone could detect the iron thread of displeasure that had woven itself into his words. She wondered if it carried to the others assembled before them. “I would ask you, to what end would you war with us? But I already know the answer. You would tell me that you war for vengeance, to punish me and mine for the decisions I have made. What will that ultimately accomplish? War depletes coffers, diminishes resources, fractures families, weakens nations. The Breach and the Sundering took their toll upon all. Tell me, Lord Hannendall, has Wycome recovered from those wars? Can your city afford yet another?”

From the other side of the hall Boone couldn’t clearly read the expression on the mustached man’s face, but she assumed it had soured. Solas took his silence as a victory won, spreading his arms to address again the entirety of his audience. “Are your grievances with my people — with me — worth the lives of yours? Because that is what is at stake, and we all of us know it.”

He stopped speaking, his gaze sweeping the crowd, inviting more dissent, inviting more questions. None came. He glanced downward at the floor for only an instant before turning his head to look at Boone. She returned his gaze mutely, knowing that whatever words fell from his mouth next would directly reference her.

His eyes moved back to the assembled faces below him. He took a deep breath; she watched his shoulders rise with the force of it. “I must speak now of she who sits at my side, the woman once known to you all as the Inquisitor. As you well know, after the events of the Exalted Council, the Inquisitor could not be found. Most assumed I had killed her, or banished her as I had the Evanuris.”

Boone couldn’t look away from him no matter how much she wished she could. She suspected it
was the same for every other living person within the dining hall. “The truth,” Solas went on, “is both more complicated and more simplistic. The Inquisitor represented a threat, a significant one and one I could not risk having interfere with what I must do. However … she was — is — a woman of substance and integrity, one who had strove to do the best for Thedas and all those who inhabit it. To kill her would have lessened this world. Instead, I chose to neutralize the threat she posed by tampering with her memory.”

Boone couldn’t help the gasp that left her, muffled by her hand — flesh and blood — that had crept upward to cover her mouth. Solas turned his head to look at her and in that span of a just a few moments she watched as a plethora of emotions slipped across his face too swiftly for her to properly identify. Turning to face the crowd once more, he continued, “I removed her recollections of the Inquisition, of me, of the Breach, of Corypheus. I altered her memory and then I sequestered her away in a secure location. Thus I was able to continue uninhibited; thus she was able to live.”

Eyes wide, Boone realized she was unconsciously shaking her head. With this lie, Solas had effectively removed any and all blame from her. He had erased her own cowardice, her unprecedented failure, and shouldered the entire burden himself. If she said nothing to oppose him, none gathered here would ever know the despicable, shameful truth. She became aware of many sets of eyes falling upon her, aware that the mutterings and whisperings that swirled throughout the hall all concerned her.

Another shouted question boomed out. “Was she your prisoner this entire time?”

“No. While my people worked at eradicating the threat the Evanuris posed, Lady Trevelyan managed to escape. I was unable to locate her immediately afterward and feared her dead, though I kept looking. It was not until recently that my agents found her by accident.”

The mustached man — Lord Hannendall of Wycome — spoke again, tone derisive. “And now she sits willingly at your side? It seems far too convenient, Fen’Harel. Why doesn’t she speak?”

Why indeed?

Boone got to her feet, fingers clutching at the edge of the table so tightly that her knuckles whitened. Solas looked at her in surprise; he had not expected her to speak, had intended to explain away her reticence as smoothly as he had explained away everything else. Her gaze swept outward, over the vast sea of faces arranged below, all of them expectantly turned in her direction. Her stomach roiled in panicked rebellion and she feared for a half-instant that she would retch then and there. She swallowed hard, breathing deep, and then resolutely lifted her head.

“I can speak.” Her voice did not waver, thought it sounded off to her own ears, a foreign sound that belonged to someone else entirely. “And be assured, all of you, that I am not Fen’Harel’s creature.”

A swift, sharp intake of breath at her side — Solas. Had she pained him with that statement? She certainly hoped so. Below her, everyone waited in complete silence to see what else she might say. She faced now a choice: she could speak the truth here and now, reveal that her cowardice had led the world to the Sundering. She could lay bare the guilt and shame she’d carried with her for so long, even knowing that she would find no absolution or salvation that way. But Boone was tired, so tired, of every day sludging through the mire of negativity and misery created of her own failures. She was tired of being chained to the past, tired too of being haunted by the ghosts that should have remained there. Once, in a different time, when she was a different woman, she would have spoken the truth.

She would not speak it tonight.

“My presence here is not an indication that I condone, in any way, what Fen’Harel has done. I do
not. Had I the power to traverse backward through time, to alter what had happened and the choices I had made, I would do so in an instant.” Her voice broke toward the end and she sucked in a deep breath in a desperate bid to keep her tears at bay.

“Of what choices do you speak?”

This shouted question came from a Qunari who stood near the back of the hall, arms folded, towering over all others. Boone did not reply immediately, perched again at a threshold. She could speak the truth. It would be easy, so very easy, to let slip the admission of her guilt. The consequences would be vast and unavoidable, but she could do it —

She was aware of Solas standing at her side, utterly motionless as though he was in that string of moments completely made of stone. He was waiting, she knew, to hear how she would answer the Qunari, to know which side of the knife’s edge her words would fall.

Finally, she spoke. “The choice to confront Fen’Harel alone, within the Crossroads, away from my companions and the full support of the Inquisition.”

Her voice betrayed her with the lie, breaking again, making every word waver. It would be to her credit, she knew — emotion was so easily misinterpreted, particularly when people wanted to misinterpret it. She cleared her throat, looking down at the table while she struggled to fortify her resolve. Looking up, she spoke again.

“I am no longer the Inquisitor. I have not been for ten years. Whatever power I carried then, whatever responsibilities I held, they are no longer mine. I did not want them then. I do not want them now. I have no intentions of reassuming that role, or any other like it. Do not mistake my presence here as an indication of cooperation toward any manner of political gain. There is very little Fen’Harel and I agree on, but where we have reached an accord is on the matter of the Mien’Harel. I know, as do you all, that the time for war has passed. The whole of Thedas has suffered enough. Every life the Mien’Harel takes, be it human or elvhen, is a life that from here on could be prevented by your willingness to set aside differences and work together.”

Near the middle of the room, a noblewoman stood. Her voice carried clearly as she made her inquiry. “And we are to trust you now, Lady Trevelyan, after ten years of absence? What of the memories Fen’Harel took from you? Have they all returned?”

Boone cast a glance around, making an effort for the first time since setting foot in the room to truly see the crowd, to try and recognize the faces that stared up at her from all directions. Their clothing, hairstyles, masks, and emblems set them all apart — Tevinter, Qunari, Ferelden, Orlesian and she even spied, in the furthest corner of the room, the starkly dyed leathers and flags of the Avvar. She looked upon them all, her eyes sweeping from one table to another until a pair of dark eyes, suddenly and piercingly familiar, arrested her own. Her heart stuttered in her chest.

Dorian.

She could not look away from him — did not want to. Dorian! she wanted to cry, wanted to fling herself across the room and shape his face beneath her hands. Before the Sundering, before Solas had again become Fen’Harel, Dorian had been her closest confidante. And then she had left him behind just as she had left everything else behind, without word, without explanation.

She felt her every breath tremble as she stared at him in a world that had narrowed to just the two of them, as she wondered, has he hated me, all this time? And then he smiled, a warm and forgiving curve of the lips meant only for her. Suddenly Boone could not breathe. Tears spilled over and she ducked her head. She felt Solas’ hand on her back, a touch meant to be comforting. Instead it
rekindled her earlier fury, and with a sound very much like a snarl she shook free of his touch, working hard to regain some semblance of control. She cleared her throat and wiped quickly at her eyes before looking up again.

“\n
“I remember Bann Thierry,” she called out to the noblewoman, whose hovering man-at-arms bore the emblem of West Hill bannorn. “Was he your father or your uncle? A cousin?”

The noblewoman looked taken aback, glancing at the others seated at her table before responding. “He was my uncle.”

Boone nodded. “And you,” she said to those sitting at a table closer to the dais upon which she stood, their masked faces tilted upward expectantly. “You wear the colors of the Marquis of Selmont.”

She waited while they nodded affirmatively before she lifted her artificial arm and pointed to a man at another table. “You are the Arl of Rainesfere. You gave the Inquisition two dozen head of cattle to supplement our supplies after we liberated Therinfal Redoubt from the Red Templars.”

There was a long pause and then the man nodded slowly, lifting his voice. “Yes, I did.”

Boone returned her gaze to the noblewoman from West Hill, answering her question. “I remember everything.”

At her side, Solas spoke into the silence that had fallen. “Are there any other questions for Lady Trevelyan before we return to the matter of the Mien’Harel?”

“Yes,” said an Orlesian. “The Inquisitor lost an arm. How has she regained it?”

Boone spoke before Solas could. “I demanded it from Fen’Harel, in exchange for my cooperation on this matter. I felt it was the very least he could do, considering.”

Her open, biting sarcasm drew a small amount of startled laughter from the crowd. Boone felt strangely galvanized by it and by the fact that from the corner of her eye, she’d seen Solas stiffen in anger. Good. Let him seethe.

“I am Evelyn Trevelyan,” Boone said aloud to her audience, words she had not spoken to anyone in long years. It felt dangerously liberating. “I have told you why I am here. It is time now to discuss the relevant threat to all of us. What say you?”

She had not expected unanimous assent and did not receive it, but enough seemed receptive to the idea that she was satisfied. Solas began to speak again, calling for an assembly. Servants poured forth from a door in the east side of the hall to clear plates and serve drinks and to help with rearranging the tables. As servants ascended the dais to clear away what remained of dinner, Boone took advantage of the commotion, slipping out of her seat and making her way off the dais. People were standing and milling about and the hall was once more filled with the dull roar of conversation. In short order they’d take their seats again and the discussion would begin in earnest. She didn’t want to be present for that. No, she’d played the role Solas had intended. If he desired to manipulate her any further, he’d have to physically drag her back here. She was done.

Considering all that had happened in the span of the past few hours, it was surprisingly easy for Boone skirt around the farthest edge of the hall. Her destination was a door on the north wall. She expected someone to come running after her, calling for the Inquisitor — expected too to see Solas appear before her, catching at her arms and imploring her to remain. Her path remained clear, however, and unchallenged she escaped from the hall.
In her desperation to leave the dining hall behind, Boone soon found herself lost within the confusing warren of corridors that connected the kitchens of Enansal Vir to the rest of the keep. Boone moved swiftly, often having to move to the side in order to let servants pass, pressing her real hand against the stone of the wall. She averted her face, unwilling to look anyone in the eye, knowing they’d be wondering why a human woman in fine garb wasn’t back in the great hall. It was a question she didn’t want to hear or answer. It had taken a monumental amount of control to stand up before those that had once been her peers — those that were among the most powerful in Thedas — without crumbling. The effort she’d exerted abandoned her now, and her knees nearly buckled beneath the intensity of emotion she’d only haphazardly managed to suppress. She’d wanted to avoid the world, to shutter herself away, to let the Inquisitor pass into memory. Instead she’d been forced to lay herself bare, expose herself to measuring eyes and ears. And — she’d lied. She’d stood before them all — esteemed authorities in their own right, as esteemed as she’d once been — and lied about the past. Her entire life the past ten years had been based on fabrication and there had been days, long and dim, that she felt she would break beneath the weight of that particular lie. But this, this lie — she could not survive it. It would destroy her. The consequences of running and hiding from the past were nigh.

She rounded a corner and felt air, fresh and cold, on her flesh. She walked faster, following the draft, until the confines of the corridor suddenly ended. She stood upon a walkway. To her right was an arched doorway and judging from the noise that filtered out from it, it led directly back to the dining hall. To her left was an small alcove balcony with a waist high stone balustrade. In her desperate meandering she’d circled the entirety of Enansal Vir. A few steps down the walkway showed her more of the same: doors to the right, alcoves to the left. She could continue on until she found either a bridge to the treetop dwellings, or a lift to take her to ground level. From there it was easy enough to leave the keep behind, to travel quickly through the city until she was safe again within the walls of her rooms.

But the crux of the matter was that she was not safe here, not in this city, not this close to Fen’Harel and his people and his manipulations. She knew that she would not be safe elsewhere, either — no, the High Keeper of the Elvhenan had proven that there was nowhere far enough that she could go, no lie substantial enough to hide behind that he would not find her. He’d proven too that there were no lengths he would not go to in order to ensure the future and the protection of the Elvhen. Boone had been a tool to that end not once, but twice. And she was certain now that as long as she lived, she’d remain his puppet, every feeling and gesture and thought somehow directed by the very will of Fen’Harel.

Unthinking, lost in the chaotic storm of her thoughts, she’d moved into the closest alcove. She clutched at the cold stone of the balustrade with both hands, staring out unseeing at Era’Adahlen. She had felt so trapped as the Inquisitor, but now, like this — she could see no escape. She was tied to Solas so tightly that freeing herself seemed an impossibility, tied so tightly that she realized he’d somehow managed to invade not only her emotions, but had succeeded at sifting through her thoughts in order to find those most private, most damning, most precious. He’d used them like rope, twining his intentions around her in a knot so complex she feared only a mortal blow could sever her from him. Panic, which had been lurking on the periphery of her mind for hours now, seemed to be gaining corporeal form. She could feel it as she would a hand at her neck, squeezing painfully, constricting the air that moved in and out of her lungs. Every breath was labored, rasping audibly, and Boone hunched over as she attempted to regain control.

Hands were on her shoulders suddenly, squeezing gently. And then it was a familiar voice, one she had not heard in many years, low and soothing in her ear with words to guide her back from the
brink. “Slowly, dear one. Breathe slowly.”

She sucked in a long, ragged breath, exhaled sharply, and inhaled again. She focused on this cycle until finally the weight in her chest lessened and the vise-like grip of anxiety loosened from her throat. “Dorian,” she whispered, turning.

He’d let his hands fall away and stood before her, smiling his crooked smile she remembered so clearly from so many years ago. He’d aged, but had done so gracefully - he was still handsome, though prolific strands of gray peppered his hair now. What wrinkles he bore only accented his strong features, adding to his perpetual air of confidence. He looked so welcoming and familiar that Boone could not help but reach her real hand out toward him. He caught it and captured it between his own, clasping it tightly.

“I—”

But that was all Boone could manage. Tears came then, flooding her eyes and spilling in swift, thick streams down her face. His visage blurred beneath them. He took a step forward and then his arms were around her, pulling her closer.

“No tears on my ring velvet,” he said softly, teasingly, and cradled her close as she wept.

.x.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was originally supposed to be a lot longer, but the last half is proving really difficult for reasons I don’t really understand. I decided to halve it in order to be able to at least post something.

A huge thank you to everyone who sent me encouraging messages during this long wait. I really appreciate it! Thank you so much for your patience.
When finally the tears ebbed, when finally her breathing evened, Boone tilted her head slowly upward in order to see Dorian’s face. He was still smiling but it was a softer smile now, without its familiar sardonic edge. His eyes were brimming too, and that sight nearly undid her again.

“Dorian,” she said in a watery voice, her hand creeping upward of its own volition to settle on his shoulder, to cling to him with all the desperation she felt.

“She tried to laugh, or at least she thought she did; it sounded more like a sob. “And I you … if only you knew how much …”

Dorian’s response was wry. “I believe I have some idea.”

She took a deep, fortifying breath and let her hand fall away, backing first one step and then two in an attempt to convince herself that she could stand alone. Her eyes found his face and she searched there for a long string of moments to find what she was still so certain she should see there: anger, frustration, blame. All she found were familiar lines and creases and those dark, dark eyes that regarded her as they ever did: as that of a friend.

“I’m sorry,” she said shakily, and paused. There was just so much she needed to apologize for, so where to begin? But Dorian held up a hand, shaking his head.

“There’s no need,” he told her, and shook his head again when she opened her mouth to disagree. “There is no need,” he repeated firmly.

“We would have died if you had remained,” Dorian said, stepping forward and taking her real hand in both of his. “If you’d chosen to pursue him with the Inquisition, we both know how it would have ended for you. It was the wisest choice to do what you did, Evelyn. It was the correct choice.”

“I could have at least tried —”

“—to what end? My dear friend, have you forgotten the many that challenged him before he destroyed the Veil? Mage circles, Templar armies, the Qunari, the Imperium, even Nevarra’s Mortalitasi — they all rose against him and he batted them away as easy as he would a fly. Even had he left you with the Anchor, it was his magic to control. You would have been as helpless against him as any other.”

“The Inquisition—”

“—was rife with spies. We’d discovered as much. He’d told you as much. Slowing him was a possibility, perhaps, but there was no way to defeat him. He is a god. Throwing the might of the Inquisition at him would have led to even more lives lost and ultimately concluded in failure.”

“I should have attempted something,” she said, long simmering aggravation evident in her voice.

“The truth? Yes, probably.” At her sharp look, he reached up to cup her cheek. “But you are not alone in that. I should have done more. We all should have done more. But even if we had, all that
would have awaited us was defeat.”

“What of our defeat after he tore down the Veil? What of the demons and the fire? What of his war with the Evanuris? What of what happens now, with the Mien’Harel?” Her voice had risen, fueled by an amalgam of despair and guilt and anguish. “You say nothing could have been prevented, but what if you’re wrong, Dorian? What if I could have prevented some part of it, any part of it? Even now I am caught again — do I live this lie, this lie he’s given me? Do I become Evelyn Trevelyan again to suit his needs? I do not want to — Maker, Dorian, I do not want to. But if I step away from this, how many more do I condemn? And,” she added, desperation bleeding into her words, “what if he refuses to let me go?”

“Ah,” he sighed heavily, letting his hand fall from her cheek to rest on her shoulder. “I’ve wondered that myself. You’re far too valuable to him now given how precarious the status of his new nation is. But, dear one … if you wish it, I will take you from here.”

Boone felt her breath catch in her throat at the thought. “How?”

One corner of his mouth curved upward. “A Magister has his ways. Though between you and I, I am certain Solas would be able to prevent me from doing so. He is frightening in his power, more so because so much of it I do not understand.”

“Oh, I know,” she said quietly.

His expression softened as he regarded her. “I will do whatever you ask, Evelyn. Do you wish me to take you away from here? I’ll try. I’ll never stop, not unless he kills me. Which,” he added with another small smirk, “He cannot do without repercussions, not without earning further distrust and enmity from the Magisterium. It would be far too risky.”

His offer was so tempting, made almost unbearably so by the fact that this was Dorian, someone she had loved dearly and someone she had assumed was lost to her forever. To leave this cage of lies and ruses Solas had so cleverly and mercilessly constructed around her, to venture out into the world and regain her anonymity, and to do so with Dorian …

But she knew Solas would not relinquish her easily — or at all. To force his hand would be lunacy. Even if he could not kill Dorian, he could banish him completely from Era’Adahlen or imprison somewhere entirely out of reach. There was, as far as they knew, no limit to what Solas could do. And, if she vanished yet again there would be war. Solas had made certain of that.

She hated saying the words. “I cannot go.”

Dorian made a noise, an exhale of pure vexation. “I know. I know what burden he’s placed upon you. I cannot fathom the lengths he has gone to to make this so. Even so, if you wish it …”

Boone’s smile was one of mixed gratification and sorrow. “Thank you, Dorian. But I can’t.”

He nodded, stepping close to enfold her into another embrace. “Then on to other topics,” he said, his voice muffled against her shoulder. “Speak to me of how you’ve been these many long years, a farmer on the Storm Coast.”

“How did you—” Boone gripped him by the upper arms and gently pushed him away. “How did you know that?”

An elfin smile played about his lips. “Can you not guess?”

She stared at him for a long moment. And then: “Thom.”
Dorian laughed outright at the expression on her face. “Yes. He kept us informed with far more subtlety than you might credit just from looking at him. He dispatched letters every time he began a new mercenary campaign, telling us you were well and where you were, though he ordered us to leave you in peace.”

Boone wrestled internally with this information. She was both thankful that Thom had made an effort to keep those she cared about informed about her welfare and furious that he had done so in secret. Looking up with Dorian, it was the gratitude that won out, and she pictured Thom’s grave, weathered face with a pang of longing so great that she felt it physically.

“Us,” she said when she could speak. “You said ‘us’. Who else?”

“Varric and Cassandra only.”

“And do they know I am here?”

“No. Although after tonight news will travel quickly. They’ll likely know before I can get word to them. Which reminds me,” he said, switching topics abruptly. “Whatever happened to the communication crystal I gave you at Halamshiral?”

She had a difficult time meeting his gaze, rubbing at her forehead a bit sheepishly. “It’s in a sack weighted with stones at the bottom of the Amaranthine. I’m sorry. Please understand — I was uncertain if Solas could somehow use it to find me. I could not risk it.”

Dorian was laughing again. “That’s one way to treat an expensive piece of jewelry given to you by a beloved friend.”

Despite the events of the evening, despite it all, Boone found herself smiling along with him. “Now then,” he said, catching her by the elbow and drawing her with him further into the alcove. “We’ve some time, I would guess, before the Great Bald Bastard comes looking for us. Tell me about the last years. Tell me everything. I want to know what I’ve missed by being apart from you.”

They were well and truly alone out here, with only the occasional flake of snow and the cool breeze to accompany them. In a quiet voice, she said, “To begin with, I go now by Boone. I had intended to leave Evelyn in the past.”

And she continued to speak at length, detailing what had become of her after her return from the Crossroads and the disbandment of the Inquisition. She spoke of finding Movda, of the trial living period the old woman had given her, of the farm and how it had changed over the years. She spoke too of Thom, of all he’d done, of the lengths he’d gone to to ensure that both women were safe and secure at their home on the coast. Once she began speaking, she found she could not stop and more importantly, did not want to. She told him of her forays throughout centralized Thedas during which she collected stories of those affected by the Breach and the Sundering, taking time to explain in greater detail the stories that had influenced her most. She described the day that she and Thom had encountered the Lander siblings, explained too how Solas’ agents had found them one night in the remnants of old Tevinter ruins not far from South Reach. She told him how one agent had taken her journal, of the quick trip she and Thom had made through the southern fen, of the day they’d parted ways. And, finally, she spoke to him of her return to Movda and of Solas’ arrival, of her own attempt to flee yet again, the attack she’d endured, and Solas’ solution to bring her to the Elvhen capital in order to keep her safe.

“And the rest, I’m sure you can put together on your own,” she concluded in a voice slightly hoarse from so much use. She had not spoken that much for that long since arriving in Era’Adahlen.
“Quite a tale,” Dorian remarked. “And mostly unpleasant. I am sorry you had to endure it, but it sounds as though you are remarkably fortunate to have both Rainier and Movda in your life.”

“I am,” Boone agreed readily. “If not for them …” She trailed off, her thoughts taking a darker turn down a path they had tread more than once before.

“No,” Dorian chided, putting his arms around her and pulling her in close. He rested his chin upon her head and it was such a comfort to feel his touch, to know he was there, to know she hadn’t lost him forever. “Don’t dwell there any longer. Come, where’s a smile? It’s not every evening you get to spend in the company of Magister Dorian Pavus. I should think you’d be rather over the moon to be held in my arms again.”

Boone’s laughter was muffled by the fine fabric of his robes. She tightened her hold on him, unwilling to ever let him go. He returned the squeeze. “Never again, dear one. Never again will you be without me. Even though I must return to the Imperium, even though you will be here, I am never leaving your life again. Do you hear me?”

“I do,” she whispered back, fighting off tears yet again.

She felt his head move slightly, felt the press of his lips against her brow. And then she felt him stiffen suddenly, pulling away and turning his head toward the alcove’s entrance. Boone, her heart sinking, did the same to find Solas standing several feet away. Dorian did not bother to loose his embrace, instead pulling Boone closer. Her cheek pressed solidly against his chest, she regarded the High Keeper and wondered a little desperately what was about to happen next.

“If you would be so kind, Magister Pavus, I wish to speak with Lady Trevelyan alone.”

His words were courteous, yes, but threaded with disapproval. It made Boone stiffen angrily. It also made Dorian smile unpleasantly; she could hear the edge in his words when he spoke. “But of course, High Keeper Fen’Harel. I would not dare to infringe upon the time you think she owes you.”

Solas inhaled sharply. Boone was torn between laughing outright at the insult or hastening to subdue their tempers. As Dorian let her go and stepped back, she caught a glimpse of his expression as he stared at Solas: haughty, angry, with that baiting smile upon his lips. All that faded as he looked to Boone.

“I will see you tomorrow, before I depart,” he said, laying his hand upon her cheek and gently caressing her skin with his thumb. She couldn’t help but lean into his touch, to cover his hand with her own. She didn’t trust her voice — to have Dorian back after so long but to watch him leave again was a struggle she hadn’t been prepared to face. Instead she simply nodded as he withdrew his touch and he stepped away.

“I will give credit where it is due,” he said as he halted in front of Solas. “You have always known how to choose your game pieces, Fen’Harel.”

Solas said nothing. Dorian moved past him and was gone.

“I’ve no doubt you’re here to placate me with words,” Boone said into the stillness that had fallen with Dorian’s departure. “As you ever did, as you always do. Words to convince me that you’re sorry, words to convince me you ultimately meant well, words to convince me that you wish to make amends. As it is, Solas, I am tired of words. I am particularly tired of your words. They’ve haunted me for ten years and now it seems they’ll haunt me to my death and beyond. I think we’ve reached the point where words are no longer necessary between us. What’s done is done. I assume you’ve
reached an accord with your guests. My part is played. Now I’m free to go.”

The heavy satire in her last sentence had the desired effect of bringing a frown into existence on Solas’ countenance. Boone continued, “But you’ll tell me now that no, I cannot go, for the Mien’Harel still desire me dead. And I know that is a partial truth, but there are other truths buried beneath that one. I cannot go because I am too useful to you now — I am the Inquisitor ressurected, as some see it. My presence here can help you cement new alliances and strengthen existing ones. I am meant to be the signal that the Elvhenan can be trusted. I am meant to be a lure.”

She had turned slightly while speaking and faced him now straight on. Several feet still separated them but she could see that his frown had faded, that his face was implacable yet again. “Who would have known,” she continued, softer this time, “that after all this time the mighty Fen’Harel, liberator of his people, creator and destroyer of the Veil, would have no other choice than to coerce a mere mortal shem into a game of pretend simply to hold his new nation together?”

She fell silent and studied him. Studied his eyes, his face, his posture, looking for a sign of remorse, an acknowledgment that he had erred, an admission of guilt. She saw none of it there. It would come later, she knew, carried by his bloody fucking words. With dismissive shake of her head, she turned and moved deeper into the alcove.

And then behind her, his voice: “You know I regret what I have done.”

She huffed a mirthless laugh. It rose as steam in the cool air. “I do not.”

He proceeded as though she had not spoke. “Every choice I’ve made since reawakening has been one necessary to the restoration of my people. I did not enjoy making them. I have dreaded most. Every step I’ve taken has been one for a better world, a greater cause and purpose for the Elvhen, yes, but also for the rest of Thedas as well.”

He approached while speaking and stood at her side, his hands on the balustrade. He had not looked at her, instead looking out over the city. His city.

“A greater cause and purpose,” Boone repeated heatedly. “How can you possibly call it that when you tally the deaths resulting from the decisions you claim to have dreaded so much? How can you dare call it that when you consider the anguish and the loss, the upheaval and the violence? You have reshaped the world as you meant to do, but you conveniently overlook the cost!”

His reply was low and swift, “I am aware the cost.”

Words. So skilled he was at using them — skilled too at hiding their real meaning, veiling intent beneath dissuasion and deception. Was there anything Solas could not claim to be master of? He was waiting mutely for her to speak, and finally she did. “I wish I had chosen differently that day in the Crossroads.”

Silence as he absorbed her meaning. And then, quietly: “I would not have spared you.”

It hurt her more than she thought it would to hear that, though she’d known it to be the truth all along. Or a partial truth, at least. Even Dorian had said as much just a short time ago. She knew Solas had been entirely capable of ending her life back then. She also knew that he had more likely than not considered it. He’d had every opportunity to do so in the Crossroads but had let her go. There was a reason for that, a reason she suspected he did not care to admit, a reason she did not want to hear.

“I know,” she said after another long span of silence. “I know, and that’s why I wish I had
confronted you. I wish it had ended that way. At least I could have died knowing I tried to stop you instead of living a coward’s life as I have. As I still am,” she amended, recalling that she’d perpetuated her greatest lie in front of the peers of the realm only a short time ago.

He stirred, a small sound leaving him — an impatient sigh or a frustrated inhale, she could not tell. “Then why did you disappear, Evelyn? Why did you slip away instead of rallying your army to confront me? You had every opportunity to do so. I let you leave the Crossroads alive. I removed the Anchor. You had the resources to hunt me down, to hound me, even delay me for months, years. Why choose otherwise?”

She took a deep breath, searching for the resilience she was certain she did not possess. “You already know why. My reasons were written in my journal. They were not yours to read but you claimed them anyway. You’ve read my reasons why, all of them.”

She refused to look at him, keeping her eyes transfixed at a spot over the city sprawled below. He was looking at her, though, and his next words were direct and inescapable, carrying an authority she was incapable of resisting. “Tell me why.”

She had known for quite some time that it would come to this, this one question she was terrified to answer, this one question she would have to answer out loud with her voice in order to give it life. Words, she thought, her emotions a tangled mass of anger and sorrow. There was defeat present as well, a weary resignation that she finally, at long last, was prepared to succumb to.

Still staring directly ahead, she replied in a voice that wavered but did not break, “Because I loved you. Though you did not welcome it and tried to dissuade me from it, I loved you enough that I couldn’t —”

She didn’t want to finish that sentence. She didn’t need to. At her side he was utterly still as though rendered immobile by the gravity of what she’d just said.

“All of Thedas sundered for my folly.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “If I’d been more mature, more guarded, less inclined to look for affection and kinship in those who had none to spare … if I’d been more like you, Solas, perhaps the world would have stood a chance. Perhaps I could have dismissed you as easily as you —”

“Nothing about that was easy!” He blared suddenly, startling her. “I could not dismiss you, no matter how I wished I could. You were always there, always prominent in my days, my thoughts! I had planned meticulously, I had accounted for every possibility, every eventuality except for you. Had I been a different man … had I been other than who I am …”

Boone stared at him, wide-eyed as he trailed off, chest heaving with the force of his outburst. Of all outcomes she’d expected from this conversation, any manner of confession from him had been the last. She was not prepared to hear this, was not prepared to deal with the weight his words carried. He was watching her with an expression akin enough to anger that she found herself backing a step.

He made a sound at her obvious retreat, a low expulsion of aggravation that was almost a growl. “So you would run from me?”

“What choice have you left me?” Her voice had risen just as his had, her fury and resentment so profound that they left her shaking in their wake. “Tell me, what choice have I been given? Either I stay and play the part of your obedient little pawn or I flee only to have you haunt me every step of the way. My choices are not choices at all: to be used or to be hunted — these are what you have left me with!”
He said nothing, could say nothing. There were no words he could use to deflect the truth she hurled at him as the only weapon left to her. “I have already failed once in my inability to do anything but capitulate to you. And now here I am again, trapped, unable to do anything but what you wish. I am tired,” she said, with hard emphasis on those three words, “of doing your bidding, Solas. I will do so no further. Find another puppet.”

She spun about with the clear intention of leaving, but he caught her by the arm and stepped into her path. He said in a strained voice, “There can be no other.”

He did not deny her puppet remark. That fact hurt her more than anything else said this night, a knife thrust between her ribs and cruelly twisted. He had not removed his hand from her arm. “What will you do?” she whispered to him. “What will you do to keep me here? Will you lock me in a tower? Chain me in my rooms? Remove my memory as you did in the lie you told all of them?”

He took a deep, uneven breath. “You cannot go, Evelyn.”

“And you’ve made certain I cannot stay, Solas.”

“If you go,” he said, “questions will arise. The Inquisitor reappears in the Elvhen capital, only to disappear there as well. Suspicions will grow. Tempers will flare. Their mutual distrust of me is so great that they will use any excuse they have to oppose me. I have given them the best excuse in revealing that you still live. It was a gamble to do so, but I am desperate. I had no other option. If the Mien’Harel remain unopposed, all of Thedas will —”

“I don’t care!” Boone hissed, wrenching at his hold. His hand slipped, but his fingers immediately tightened to the point of being uncomfortable. “I don’t care any longer! There will be war, there will be death, there will be suffering as there always has been! I did my best for four fucking years to prevent all of it, to what end? To watch you and yours destroy the world regardless!”

She was perilously close to weeping openly, caught as always between the ever warring factions of her guilt and anger. With her artificial hand she shoved him in the chest hard in a bid to gain freedom. He staggered back, caught off guard, but recovered quickly, gripping her arms in both hands this time. They tussled, and she swore at him furiously when he refused to relinquish his hold. She shoved him again with both hands this time, freeing herself, and watched with satisfaction as he stumbled back against the stone wall of the alcove. She saw the livid way his face twisted as he pushed himself upright again.

“Will you turn me to stone now, Fen’Harel?” she asked, every syllable that fell from her lips a taunting one.

She watched his shoulders rise with the force of his deep inhale. He was attempting to subdue his own temper, she knew, and mulishly decided not to give him the chance. “Or perhaps cut off my other arm? Turn me into a true cripple, completely helpless and more suitable to your needs?”

She wanted him to lunge at her. She wanted him to strike her, to hurt her, to further validate the sense of betrayal he’d already instilled within her so long ago. He did not. He stood where he was, mute and unmoving.

“You should have killed me,” she said, her voice ugly as she forced the words out from between clenched teeth. “I wish you had.”

He did move then, taking two slow steps toward her. She steeled herself, both afraid and full of defiant expectation. His face was devoid of anything, a blank mask that was somehow more terrifying in that instant than any other countenance he could bear.
“Yes,” he said slowly. “I should have killed you in the Crossroads. I could not. I never once intended to. You were a threat to me then even without an arm and as you once said, I am not a man who tolerates threats. It should have been a simple decision, an easy one. Instead I found another path. What I said tonight in the hall was the partial truth. I would have subdued your memories. I would have tamed them and kept you safe in a location of my choosing while I dealt with the Evanuris.”

Hearing him say it out loud thus made her skin crawl. Her next words were flat. “You would have changed me. Kept me a prisoner.”

“Yes.”

“And when it was all done and dealt with? When I could no longer pose a threat because you’d achieved your goal — what would have befallen me then?”

He looked away from her then, an avoidance reflex. “I don’t know.”

A new thought had come to her, a realization that crept slowly and insidiously over her as an insect might. “My memories? Would you have ever returned them? Or …” She could not finish, regarding him with a newfound sense of horror, something she’d never felt for him before as she imagined a life where crucial memories had been forcibly taken from her. She would have lived thinking Solas a friend, a trusted companion. She would have lived never being able to recall just what he had done in first giving Corypheus his orb and later in tearing down the Veil. She would have lived never knowing that he had locked away a part of her simply to make her more biddable, easier to manipulate into his plans. He would have turned her into nothing more than a tool, something brought out only to use and then put away when her time was over.

He’d returned his eyes to her face had seen the way she looked at him, recognized her horror and disbelief. His expression contorted, revealing a flickering glimpse of emotions she was no longer certain he could feel. “I don’t know, Evelyn,” he whispered harshly. “I don’t know what I would have done. All I do know is that I could not do it, not then. I could not take those memories from you.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he said, shifting as though to reach for her but immediately checking the movement. “Because I could not bear the thought of you looking at me in any other way than what you used to … like you did then, before I … You would have seen me through the eyes of a lie that I had created. I would have been a lie.”

She regarded him through narrow eyes. “You’ve only ever been a lie to me, Fen’Harel.”

His mouth curled upward to form the grim mockery of a smile. “And yet you’ve seen the truth of me, more than any other living being.”

“If this,” she lifted her artificial hand and fluttered it about to indicate the keep, the hall, the city and everything that had transpired within, “is the truth of you …”

“Yes?”

He was goading her. It felt as though she observed him from a world apart in that moment — she, standing precariously on a crumbling cliff while staring up at him secure upon his mountain, the god that dictated the direction her life was to take, had taken, and would take. One gesture from him and he could destroy the rock out from beneath her, erode it all away until there was nothing left to cling to. But no, he’d already done that when he’d exposed who Boone really was, stripped her of her
admittedly meager defenses and left her bare and vulnerable. The divide between them widened with every word said, every gesture made. They were not meant to exist on the same level, no. They were disparate from each other, Elvhen and human, god and mortal, villain and coward.

She closed her eyes, feeling a throbbing pain burgeon to life in her temples. Opening them again, she asked, “Will I ever be free of you?”

It almost seemed as though he winced at her words, his shoulders jerking, the muscles in his jaw tightening visibly. “Yes. If you wish it.”

“Once the Mien’Harel are dealt with?”

“Yes.”

“And how long will that take? Months? Years? I’m not immortal. Unlike you, death is a very real possibility for me. I would like at least a few years to call my own, free from your influence.”

“I swear to you,” he said slowly, “that I will do everything in my power to see them subdued as quickly as possible.”

“And then I’m free?”

“And then you’re free.”

“I would have your word, Solas — if it still counts for anything.”

He said flatly, “You have it.”

She fixed him with a hard stare, wondering if he meant it, wondering if he would hold to it and knowing that if he chose not to, if he chose to persist interfering in her life that the only true way out for her then was death. “Very well,” she said after a long pause. “Don’t mistake this as an acceptance of what you’ve done. Don’t expect graciousness from me any longer. I will be Evelyn Trevelyan in this city and I will play the role you’ve thrust me into, but we part here.” As she spoke, she reached beneath the sleeve of her dress and removed the armlet. The sensation of having an arm and then suddenly not was still new enough to her that it was disconcerting. Resolute, she held the armlet out to him.

He looked at it and she watched his body change visibly as all the anger suddenly drained from him, watched as weariness and sorrow withered the set of his shoulders. “It was meant as a gift.”

“It was meant to garner gratitude from me.”

“No. Evelyn—”

“Stop.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to hear it, any of it.”

“But you will,” he pressed. “You will hear this. I’ve no apologies to mend what I’ve done. However — not everything you think you know of me is true. I know,” he raised his voice to speak over hers as she openly began to scoff, “that you will refuse to acknowledge that. I cannot blame you. But, Evelyn …”

She raised an eyebrow as he halted, looking for a moment uncharacteristically open. He continued almost reluctantly, “Yours were not the only unwanted emotions all those years ago. I have … valued what we have known together.”
“Valued,” she repeated, both disbelieving and indignant.

“Yes.” He lifted his chin, eyes narrowing. “These months you’ve been in Era’Adahlen — you cannot deny a certain regard has grown between us.”

Her expression was one of scathing incredulity. “It was engineered by you. To further your own agenda.”

“In part,” he admitted with a slight inclination of his head. He ignored the way Boone’s lip twisted. “And, in part, it was a natural occurrence — a continuance, if you will.”

She stilled, her voice becoming low and soft. “Be very careful with your next words.”

“Then I will not say aloud what you seem so determined not to hear. It matters not, I suspect. I’ll ask only if we can be civil for the duration of your stay.”

“I don’t want to be civil any longer.”

“How petulant you sound.”

“How else should I sound?” she demanded, her temper flaring once again. “In one evening you’ve betrayed me and exposed me, and now you ask for civility? Have you any idea how absurd your expectations are?”

“Not expectations,“ he corrected. “Rather, they are hopes. I hope that we can remain civil toward one another.”

“Why?”

“You know why,” he responded evenly. “But you’ve always had a proclivity toward being obstinate. Are you truly this blind? Or is this willful ignorance, this refusal of yours to acknowledge that which exists between us?”

She laughed. It was a harsh, cutting sound. “Don’t pretend that we speak now of love, Solas.”

He regarded her out of solemn eyes, head tilted slightly. He surprised her then with a smile, small and saddened, and it vexed her that she felt a pang of something other than anger at the sight.

“Civility,” he said after a short span of silence, when all traces of sadness had faded from his face, “is all I ask for. For as long as you remain here. It will make what we must endure easier on us both. I implore you to consider it.” He stepped past her, out of the alcove. “Good night, Evelyn.”

She didn’t turn to watch him leave. Instead, she stared down at the armband she still held that he’d refused to take. Their argument reverberated in her mind and she knew she would be reliving it for hours, reliving the bitter revelations, the hard questions and the brutal answers. Words, she thought with tired frustration, her fingers tightening around the armband. Words to manipulate, to wound, to goad, to control.

I am tired of words.

With a heavy sigh, she turned and left the alcove, treading the path to return to her rooms and the sleepless night that awaited her there.

.x.
“It is remarkable.”

Boone, standing next to Dorian on the balcony of her room, nodded her silent agreement. The expanse of Era’Adahlen lay before them awash in the light of the early morning sun. Snow crystals on the rooftops and bridges and tree branches glinted, creating the breathtaking facade of a city sculpted entirely of ice.

“I did not truly believe he was capable. Even after the Sundering and the war that followed, I doubted. Perhaps I needed proof. And now here I stand, witness to all of this …” Dorian shook his head. “For all his crimes, what Solas has given back to the Elvhen is commendable.”

“He—”

“I am not excusing him, nor anything he has done,” the Magister interrupted her gently. “But you cannot deny what’s before you, Evelyn. A decade ago the elves were scattered, either imprisoned by poverty within alienages or living the lives of nomads and forest clans. They were subject to persecution across the whole of Thedas. They were slaves within my own homeland. They were subjugated, looked down upon, taken advantage of. But now … now they are a nation once more, united, protected and powerful.”

That he was right only upset Boone further, and in an attempt to suppress her reaction she shook her head and turned away. When Dorian laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder, she let out her breath in a long sigh. “I know,” she admitted reluctantly. “What Solas has done for his people is remarkable—but it is hard, too hard, to acknowledge that when I know the bloody truth of it all.”

With his other hand on her other shoulder, he exerted gentle pressure in order to turn her back to face him. “I should not have spoken of it. I’ve little time with you before I must go and I would rather we not part on such a note. Let us make the most of it, hmm?”

Boone nodded, summoning a smile. She leaned back against the balcony, crossing her arms over her chest. “I wasn’t certain he’d permit you to see me this morning.”

He slid in beside her, mirroring her pose. “Nor was I. But there was a guide waiting outside my door at daybreak who politely informed me she’d take me to you when I was ready. And here I am.”

“Here you are,” Boone echoed fondly. She reached for him with her flesh and blood hand; he took it in his own, squeezing.

They spent a few minutes thus in comfortable quiet. It was he that broke it, clearing his throat and looking off to the east, where the sun had finally crested the treeline. “How did it go between you and he last night?”

She made a disgusted sound low in her throat. “Exactly as you probably expected. Exactly as I expected. We argued and reached no conclusion whatsoever. Though,” she added darkly, “there were some unwelcome revelations throughout.”

“Such as?”
Boone heaved another sigh before beginning to recount the parts of her conversation with Solas that she had found most upsetting. When she’d finished, arms folded over her chest again, Dorian let out a low whistle.

“To think that he has the power to alter memory in addition to all the rest,” he said, shaking his head in reluctant awe. She huffed her agreement, her expression decidedly less than awestruck.

“And to think,” he continued slowly, his eyes upon Boone now pensive, “that he could have changed your memory at any given time throughout your years as Inquisitor, but did not.”

“What are you implying?”

“Evelyn, with that ability he could have remade you into the perfect agent for his cause. To pluck the memories he didn’t need from you in order to make you more malleable—he easily could have manipulated you into blind worship, into molding the Inquisition into a tool for his means … and yet he didn’t.”

“Perhaps it would have better if he had,” Boone remarked idly in an attempt to divert the course of the conversation. The recollection of all Solas had said and his reasoning for not tampering with her memory were subjects she didn’t want to think about. Not here, not now, not with a friend she’d spent ten years believing she’d never see again. “I know the implications, Dorian,” she said tiredly, turning around and propping her elbows on the balcony’s railing. “And believe me when I say I will never be able to forget them. But as you said, your remaining time here is short. Speak to me of other things before you go. Please?”

“Very well,” Dorian agreed amenably. He turned as well, moving closer to her and sliding an arm across her shoulders. “Have you any idea how barbaric I find it that these people actually sleep in trees?”

It was nearly midday when the representatives from Tevinter took their leave. The group consisted of Dorian, an Altus, four members of the Publicanium, and two dozen armed soldiers as an escort, and Boone had followed them to the city’s main gate. As the others began to mount in preparation to depart, Dorian enveloped her in one tight, final embrace. Her eyes were wet when the drew apart and his were too, and clasping both her hands in his he began to wax lyrical about her beauty in a voice loud enough to reach the ears of all assembled. Laughing, she kissed him on the cheek and reluctantly bid him go.

She could not stop the tears as he rode out at the head of his party, even though he’d promised he would come to see her again, even though she knew he meant every word. She watched after him until he and his companions were lost to the trees and then she turned to make her way back to her rooms. She paused upon seeing Solas, standing surrounded by other Elvhen diplomats who had gathered to bid the Tevinter delegation farewell. He was watching her, had been watching her, marking her laughter and marking too her tears. Their eyes met, his face implacable and hers red and flushed, and she found herself holding her breath until he finally looked away.

*Bring him back, Fen’Harel!* she wanted to beg. But he was already speaking with an Elvhen woman at his side and Boone knew that any supplication she made would never be enough.

From the main gates of the city she went immediately to the keep, entering Solas’ study and slipping through the Eluvian quickly, afraid that if she lingered he would appear. She found Movda outside in
the compound’s yard, cloaked and hooded against the wet chill of winter on the Storm Coast, feeding the exotic birds Solas had given her. The old woman looked up to see Boone standing in the door of the small house. One glimpse of the younger woman’s expression had her swiftly scattering the last of the seed in her hands and moving toward her friend.

“It’s done,” Boone told her friend in a voice that shook. She hadn’t fully permitted her emotions to spill over since the night previous, instead keeping them in tenuous check in order to deal with Solas and say her farewells to Dorian. But now she was in the company of one she loved more than most any other, one she considered family, and at the sight of the concern on Movda’s lined face, the wall she’d erected around those emotions suddenly collapsed.

“What’s done?” Movda asked, her voice hitching in alarm as she caught sight of the tears on Boone’s cheeks. She stepped into the house and immediately pulled the younger woman near, wrapping her thin arms around her. “Boone, what has happened?”

Holding on to Movda with a desperate strength, Boone explained between sobs all that had transpired the night previous. Movda, listening and murmuring reassurances at intervals, closed her eyes in utter dismay as the story unfolded. She had feared this, of course, had in fact expected it as an inevitable conclusion to Solas’ appearance here at the coast those months ago. Boone had expected betrayal too, at least on some level, but now face to face with the truth, as well as the truths hidden from years past … it was the reopening of a wound that had never really closed, a bone-deep gash that had become as much a part of her as her soul.

Later, when she was unable to weep anymore, Movda had arranged two chairs in front of the fire and persuaded her to sit in one. They spoke in low voices of impossibilities: Boone leaving Era’Adahlen, Solas letting her go, her return to the life of a wandering scribe. Every scenario they discussed could never happen. There was far too much at stake should Boone actually make another attempt to disappear, a series of consequences that could not be permitted to occur.

“And what of Thom?” Movda asked eventually.

Boone squeezed her eyes closed against another wave of despair. What of Thom, indeed? He’d been gone for nearly half his contract, wasn’t scheduled to return until Drakonis. She had no doubts that no matter where he was on his campaign that he would hear of what had happened. And when he did …

“Will you send for him?”

Boone shook her head. “No.”

“Boone …”

“Word will reach him far faster than any missive I send could. He’ll know soon enough. And I don’t want him to come, Movda. I don’t want him to see what has happened … he’ll wage war against Solas alone on my behalf.” And it was the truth. Solas himself had discerned it. Thom was fiercely protective of Boone, to the point of his own detriment. But even as she uttered the words she was assailed by a sense of longing to see his face, to hear his voice, to simply know that he was near. She missed him dearly, but she greatly feared for him as well. There was no way of knowing just what he would do with the knowledge that Boone had been outed as Evelyn Trevelyan and now resided within the capital of the Elvhenan.

Movda was watching her, brow creased with disapproval. “You know as well as I what he’ll do,” Boone offered up in weak defense.
“And you know as well as I how hurt he’ll be if you don’t send word to him. Even if he hears it from another first, he still must hear it from you.”

The older woman was right, and Boone finally nodded her head in agreement.

They spent the remainder of the day together, speaking little. Boone reached for Movda often, holding her hand or leaning her head upon her shoulder, needing that manner of comfort. Movda reciprocated without hesitation, knowing that her friend was tottering on the edge of a personal calamity unlike any other, a calamity brought forth by a man who’d already done her grievous harm. When evening came and the sun began to descend, Boone took her reluctant leave, slipping back through the Eluvian. Solas’ study was empty much to her relief. She quickly left the keep and returned to her rooms.

Hours later, she penned a note to Thom. A simple request to Irithala had secured her the tools to do so. By candlelight, she wrote to him with a slow, faltering hand.

_Thom. I know by now you’ve heard. I know I should have sent for you. I wish I had. I did not know then what he had planned. I had thought perhaps it was a temporary arrangement, that it would be over by the time you returned. It pains me greatly to admit that I was wrong, and now I am more the fool for it._

_Please—do not act rashly. I promise you I am fine. What hurts I have are invisible and will heal. I am clothed and fed and sheltered. I am safe. Movda is safe, too. We both await you._

_Be well, my dearest friend. Travel safely._

_Boone_

The next morning she delivered the sealed letter to Solas’ study. He was again absent. Boone placed it on the center of his desk, the address—_Thom Rainier, care of Lord Chancellor Jerrown of Tantervale_—clear to see. She had no doubts that Solas would read it, but also knew he would send it. Secure in that tiny bit of comforting knowledge, she left the letter there.

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In the following days, it was surprisingly easy for Boone to retake the mantle of Inquisitor, due in large part to the fact that it was now a hollow title. There was no actual organization to oversee, no decisions to make. All that had been required from her in the weeks after the announcement that Evelyn Trevelyan did in fact still exist were periodic appearances at whatever feasts and meetings Solas deemed important enough. When present at these, she was always seated at his side. She would smile and engage when spoken to, but refused to speak on any topic other than the importance of defeating the _Mien’Harel_. Solas, who observed her conversations closely, would always step in if someone became too insistent on speaking with Boone about the past, and with polite deliberation would steer the discussion back on course.

While she was reluctantly willing to converse with others for the duration of this farce, she refused to speak to Solas with anything other than curt, succinct sentences. She had made her opinion of Fen’Harel public knowledge the night of _that_ feast and as such felt no need to address him with anything other than cool recognition when appearing with him at social functions. To his credit, he did not push her on this, instead giving her the peace from his presence that she so desperately needed.

There was also the matter of the steady (and overwhelming) stream of correspondence she’d been receiving from individuals all over Thedas, but she adamantly refused to open them save for two.
When Solas had held those two missives out to her with, revealing in a sober voice just who had written them, she felt her mouth go dry in shock. She had taken them with a trembling hand and later, when Solas was gone, had opened them with hands that felt numb.

Scribbles, began the first, and it was a long time before she could bring herself to continue reading.

I bet now you wish you’d come to Kirkwall after all. You’ll be happy to hear that you’re still a Comtesse after all these years. There’s still a mansion here for you too, but if you’re planning on taking possession you’ll need to give me a few week’s notice so I can evict the current tenants. If you still have the key to the city, I’ll have to ask you to bring that with you. I’m afraid Bran still hasn’t forgiven me for that one.

Now that the niceties are out of the way, there’s something I need to tell you. Or hell, maybe you already know by now. The fact is, I’ve known you were alive ever since you left. Rainier saw fit to keep me (and Cassandra and Dorian) informed. He also gave us updates over the years, bits and pieces of insight into how (and where) you’ve been. As I understand it you’ve become something of a writer. I always knew you would be. Sounds like the subject matter is a bit dark, though, but I can’t really say I blame you there.

Rumors are flying that you’re living in the new Elvhen city, in the company of Fen’Harel (I prefer Solas, actually. It’s a lot less pretentious and Dalish-y.) I don’t know the details (rumors are unreliable like that), but I can only assume that you’re there unwillingly and probably as part of one of Solas’ grand plans. Given how most his schemes have panned out for the rest of the world, I’m a little worried for you. More than a little. A lot. Scribbles, there’s not much I can do from here (or at all, against a god), but I’m writing to tell you this: anything you need, anything within my power I can give or do for you, you have it.

I don’t know if this will get to you. And if it does find its way there, I don’t even know if he’ll let you see it. I’m really banking on the Maker for this one.

Please, Scribbles—be safe.

-Varric

Blinking through slow tears, Boone read and reread his letter, running the fingers of her artificial hand over the rough parchment and cherishing every line of the dwarf’s squat yet neat handwriting. When she’d studied it so thoroughly she had nearly every word committed to memory, she turned her attention to the other piece of parchment lying folded in her lap.

Inquisitor,

I suppose I should no longer call you that. I expect you would hate it. In any other circumstance I would tell you that I am glad to hear you are alive, but the fact is that I have known all along. By now you must know that Rainier kept some of us informed of your whereabouts. He insisted, however, that we not seek you out for fear of Solas discovering your location. Despite my reservations—and there were many—I did as he asked.

Word is now spreading across Thedas that you have been found again. I have heard from someone who was present that night that you voiced support for Fen’Harel’s plan to defeat the group of Elvhen rebels that he refers to as the Mien’Harel. I have also heard that you made it clear that you will not re-assume a role such as you once had as Inquisitor. I am certain you have your reasons, though I ask you to consider what could be accomplished should you choose otherwise.

I must assume your presence in the Elvhen nation is by choice. Surely, given the level of tensions
between the Elvhen and the rest of the world, Solas would not dare to detain you there against your will. It would be a most unwise decision, even for him. I must also assume that he would not dare to isolate you from those concerned about your well-being by denying you their correspondence.

I will see you soon. Maker watch over you.

-Cassandra

The last part of Cassandra’s letter brought a grim smile to Boone’s face; the Seeker had known Solas would read any missive before he passed it on and so she’d included a message for him as well. Her thinly veiled threat was ultimately wasted on Solas, but it heartened Boone to know Cassandra still cared enough to make it. After rereading both letters multiple times, she placed one atop the other and folded them together. They were as invaluable to her as talismans, proof that those she’d called friends in a past life still viewed her in the same light now despite all odds.

Words, she mused, smiling faintly. They were not always a threat.

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Two months passed, and then three, and Boone passed the days secure within the admittedly gilded cage of Era’Adahlen. Her waking hours were filled still with securing books from the library of Enansal Vir, with reading, with observing the archers under Abelas’ command. They were spent too conversing at length with Irithala, who had not shied away from Evelyn the once-Inquisitor as Boone had deeply feared she would. The girl had been hesitant at first in the days following the announcement, but at Boone’s earnest request had returned to treating the human in the same sunny manner as she always had.

As winter began to wane and the days gradually lengthened, it became apparent that Solas’ plan to form some manner of tenuous alliance between the Elvhenan and the political and noble elite of central Thedas was working. It vexed Boone greatly that it was her presence within the Elvhen nation that had partially led to this accomplishment, and vexed her even more to know it meant that Solas had been correct in his bold assumptions. However, as Solas’ carefully laid plans began to develop even further, Boone was forced to reluctantly admit that they were proving effective. She had made it clear to him that she wished to be kept informed about any and all progress made in eradicating the Mien’Harel, and Solas did as she asked. Elvhen scouting parties were now being aided by Ferelden and Orlesian forces. Large, routine patrols of mingled human and Elvhen troops frequently made their way through areas the Mien’Harel had struck hardest in order to discourage their return. Small scouting bands of the Elvhen rebels were intercepted and dealt with. The larger attacks, the massacres that had brought eastern Thedas to the brink of war, began to slow. As word of these successes began to grow and spread, there was an increase in outside interest concerning Era’Adahlen. Where once a visiting Nevarran or Antivan envoy was a rarity, it became more and more commonplace. As such, the amount of diplomatic affairs began to increase and begrudgingly, Boone attended them all.

In the first early days of spring, a large dinner was held to commemorate the first visit by ambassadors from both Rivain and the Anderfels. Boone’s mood going into this particular occasion was an inquisitive one; she’d never truly expected an interest in peace from nations so far removed from the worst effects of the Sundering. And so she attended as she usually did, clad in deep green and gold finery that Irithala had created. Throughout the feast itself she remained largely silent, gracing others with smiles and pleasantries if approached but for the most part content to observe how Solas interacted with the foreign envoys. Once the feast was ended (a process which took hours), Boone vacated her traditional spot at the head table next to the High Keeper and began to wander the expanse of the main hall.
She was curious about the Rivaini and the Anders, having never dealt with either before. And so she meandered throughout the crowds, viewing the various lords and ladies, the Elvhen and the humans as they indulged in the age-old social games of gossip and speculation. She eavesdropped, unabashed, on numerous conversations, delighting in the accents new to her, in the colloquialisms and phrases she’d never heard before. She circled the room more than once, halting when approached by someone wishing to speak before moving on. Late in the evening, growing weary, she paused in her wandering to perch upon the stone base of a pillar near hall’s entrance. She had already stayed longer this night than she did most, but found herself reluctant to leave. She had enjoyed herself, as much as she was able; it was a strange sensation to have these days.

“You and the Inquisitor have reconciled your differences, High Keeper?”

Boone’s head snapped up at the sound of Solas’ title. It had been spoken in a women’s voice, rich and throaty, the words difficult to decipher for the heavy Rivaini accent. It was coming from somewhere on the other side of the large pillar, the speaker—and Solas—hidden from sight by the column of stone.

“We have laid to rest some and work still through others,” was Solas’ smoothly evasive reply.

“If what is known of your pasts is true,” the woman said, unabashed, “there was a great deal to lay to rest.”

“Can the same not be said of every long friendship?” Solas asked.

There was a pause. “Yes,” the woman agreed, her tone thoughtful. “But—High Keeper, many voices say that it is not mere friendship between you and Lady Trevelyan. Rather, they say that it is more than that, has been more than that for quite some time.”

“Many voices,” Solas echoed, and the amusement in his voice was evident.

“And so?” the Rivaini visitor pressed. “Can what is said be believed? Is she to become your consort once the matter with the Mien’Harel is ended?”

**Consort!** Boone nearly shouted the word out loud in outraged disbelief. She caught it before it exploded forth, bitterly choking it down, pressing her back against the pillar in order to better hear Solas’ reply.

“I must apologize, Lady Opalliez, but I believe some things are meant to remain private.”

A white hot flare of fury exploded behind Boone’s eyes. He hadn’t denied the rumors that she and he were lovers! If anything, he’d said just enough to lend credence to those rumors. He had ensured that this woman and those with her and all those they interacted with would speak the lie, spread it, until even more believed it to be true. The urge to whip around the pillar and lunge at Solas was so strong she had to clench her jaw, grinding her teeth together until it hurt. How dare he? *How dare he?*

The woman was speaking again, but the words were lost as Boone pushed herself away from the pillar and stalked toward the entrance of the main hall. She jostled men and women as she moved, eliciting indignant cries and questions. She ignored them all.

.x.

She was waiting for him in his study later, seated at the chair behind his desk, the large room illuminated only by the lantern she’d brought with her. She hadn’t bothered to rifle through the numerous documents and books arranged on his desk in neat piles, though she’d been sorely tempted
to. Instead, leaning back and resting her elbows on the armrests, she passed the time studying the artwork on the walls. The vivid, austere images were very similar to those Solas had created within Skyhold’s rotunda and she found herself wondering just what events these paintings portrayed. The Sundering? The war against the Evanuris? The claiming of the Brecilian? There were elements she recognized—eerie wolves, eldritch silhouettes of trees, towering mountain crags—but if there was obvious symbolism hidden beneath the artwork, she was oblivious to it.

When Solas entered the chamber some time later, she found herself sitting bolt upright. He was clad as he had been earlier in the evening, in fine clothing of blue and black with the familiar wolf pelt draped over his shoulder and belted at his waist. In concession to the cold, he’d donned a heavy, fur-lined cloak and gloves. His eyes were cast downward as he crossed the threshold, but he seemed to sense immediately that he was not alone. His head snapped up to find Evelyn seated at his desk. He halted, brows furrowed in inquiry.

She asked coldly, “Consort?”

He resumed walking, approaching the desk and pulling off his gloves one at a time. Setting them on the corner of the desk, he loosened the ties of his cloak and draped it over the nearest chair. With a simple gesture toward the stone hearth he conjured a fire into being.

“It is an idea not without merit,” he said finally as he turned to face her, folding his arms.

“Explain to me how you think so.”

He held her gaze. “As with any such union made between kingdoms or nations, it would serve to strengthen political ties.”

“There’s no guarantee it will.”

“No. But as you have seen, the simple fact that you are here has already proved beneficial. Knowing a human—particularly one such as yourself—has chosen to live within this city has eased the minds of those who would not willingly visit here before. You cannot refute the evidence,” he said, raising his voice slightly to cut over hers as she opened her mouth to contend his words. “The dinner tonight was proof enough. Despite how you feel about being here, Evelyn, it is working.”

Irritation pulled her to her feet and she stood, leaning her hands flat on the desk. “Then be content with that! Why fuel the rumors that swirl throughout Ferelden regarding us? Understand, Solas, that this is not easy for me! I am here because I’ve no other choice. This facade I live every day is barely tolerable, but for you to suggest to counsels and diplomats and ambassadors that you and I are lovers …!”

“Would it be so terrible a thing if we were?”

His question took her completely aback. As per every conversation they’d had over the past three months, she’d expected him to meet her anger with his own, or respond to it with an impassive demeanor that infuriated her even more. It took her a long string of moments to sort through her turbulent thoughts in order to formulate a response.

“You once said you would not lie with me under false pretenses,” she reminded him then in a low voice, the recollection of that particular discussion between them an unpleasant one. She watched his face carefully as he too relived that memory, watched as his mouth tightened, as the fine creases at the corner of his eyes became more visible. Driven by the now ever-present need to be contradictory, she added, “And what are we now if not a falsehood?”
He approached the desk, leaning to place his hands flat upon it too. They were face to face now, far
closer than she was comfortable with, but she refused to withdraw. “Tell me,” he said, his words
slow and deliberate. “Tell me truly that the idea repulses you. Tell me that you have not entertained
thoughts of it before. Tell me and do not lie to me, Evelyn, for I will know.”

And, Maker curse him, those thoughts were suddenly there, direct and inescapable. She had thought
of it before, long ago, when she had been giddy in love with a god disguised as a man. How could
she not, when the lingering sensation of his lips upon hers had haunted her every night, when his
graceful and refined compliments and allusions served to fuel her longing? But those desires were
not only confined to the distant past, no. They had arisen since he had found her again, much to her
confusion and aggravation, and had returned to her with force the night he had gifted her the armlet.

I haven’t! She wanted to snap at him, but she could not. He would know a lie. She straightened,
swallowing the words. His eyes upon hers were direct and challenging, and with an exhale of pure
vexation she looked away.

She said, because she had to say something, “It matters not.”

“It could,” he replied. “If you would let it, it could matter a great deal.”

She stared at him, disbelief and annoyance warring within her. There was a craving there as well, its
treachery tendrils unfurling within her as those thoughts still clamored for attention. To give them
attention was to give them strength, to admit to herself that how she felt was far different than the
front she had presented. Of what very few defenses remained to her, the illusion that she regarded
him with anything other than rancor was the one most crucial to her sustained sanity.

“It would be impossible,” she told him, shaking her head. “There is too much between us, too much
that we cannot reconcile.”

“Cannot, or will not?”

Her lips flattened into a thin line. “How could you possibly expect me to forget all that has happened
between us?”

“I expect nothing of the sort. I’m not speaking of marriage, Evelyn. I speak only of a union—
temporary, if you so wish it—that could prove beneficial in myriad ways.”

He spoke matter-of-factly, but there was something in his gaze that belied the perfunctory nature of
his words. Was he too imagining that of which he spoke? That possibility brought a rush of heat to
her cheeks and she averted her face, flustered and hating it.

“So you are not as indifferent to the idea as you would pretend,” he murmured.

Damn him. She passed a hand over her eyes, willing the blush to subside. “I cannot do it,” she said
in a low voice, still refusing to look at him. “Regardless of whether I have thoughts—” acutely aware
of his penetrating gaze, she was unable to continue in that vein. She tried a different tact. “There are
others you could choose from,” she said, referring to the daughters, granddaughters and nieces she
knew had been suggested to the High Keeper by a handful of the most ambitious of Thedas’
governing elite. “Others who offer a far more advantageous union than I.”

“I am not interested in others.”

She inhaled sharply. Why? She almost asked. Why me, even now, after all of it? But she couldn’t
voice that question, because she knew with a certainty that she wasn’t prepared to deal with the
answer. Hating her uncertainty, hating too this feeling of discomfiture, she found herself suddenly
angry.

He had turned and perched upon on the edge of the desk, and when she was able to look at him again he read the wrath etched clearly into the planes of her face. He said calmly, “You needn’t overreact. Thus far the only thing of that nature that exists between us is rumor.”

“How you won’t deny!”

“I have yet to confirm it,” he reminded her.

“Why would you?” she demanded. “Isn’t it enough that your lies have placed me here? That I’m trapped here until your ends are met? My life is your plaything—it always has been! Solas,” she said, her words both imploring and condemning, “consider please what remains to me that is mine and mine alone? I stay because I must, but you ask for civility. Your utter disregard for me—”

“My disregard?” His voice lilted upward as he pushed himself off the desk.

“Yes.” She tilted her chin upward, stubbornly squaring her jaw. “You cannot say otherwise.”

“No?” He arched a brow and approached her with a measured, nearly predatory tread. She had the distinct impression he meant to corner her, to cage her, and her traitorous heart lurched sideways in her chest. “And what of your disregard, Evelyn, in light of our last discussion on these matters?”

Her brows furrowed as she struggled to interpret what he meant. When realization dawned the look she fixed upon him was sharp enough to wound. “So we’re back to the pretense of love between us?”

“You know as well as I that it is not mere pretense,” he said. His voice had dropped in tone. He took one slow, deliberate step forward, until there was very little space left between them, until she could not suppress the shiver that crept across her shoulders. “If I were to touch you now, would you respond? Would your heart and breath betray you?”

They were already betraying her. She struggled to form words with a mouth gone suddenly dry. “You know that answer,” she responded a little breathlessly. “You know everything about me.”

His expression blanked. He backed away. “I … *ir abelas*.”

Freed from the overwhelming stimulus that was his presence, Boone closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. He was correct in one thing, correct in that she knew beyond any doubt that there was still a connection between them, a connection that had survived those ten long years, subdued and locked away. And she hated that despite everything, despite his lie and his machinations that had led her to be trapped here, that connection still existed.

She watched, both bewildered and relieved by his sudden change in demeanor, as he turned and walked to the plush armchairs set before the fire. She’d seen him driven by restrained passion before, on the night he’d given her the armlet, when he’d pressed a kiss into her artificial palm. She’d seen the same heat in his eyes, heard his voice take on the same soft, compelling tone. But he had not ventured beyond that, beyond his artful, flattering words, his brief touches and warm gazes. He had only now just given voice to something she dare only think about in the most isolated hours of the night, something she was sure would never be elaborated upon given recent events. In light of what had just been said, in light of the way her heart still thundered in her chest, she was seized with an insistent need to know why.

She followed the path he had taken, her steps almost hesitant. “Why this? Why now?”
He paused before the chair but did not sit. His eyes were on the fire, “What reasons I have to give, you would only deny away.”

She frowned. Obstinacy was her method of defense when pressed, not his. “Why?” she persisted.

He had not moved, eyes still fixated on the dance of the flames. “I had thought upon bringing you here that we had the luxury of time, albeit a limited amount. I had intended to gradually introduce you to different aspects of the Elvhenan, of our political state, and to suggest to you that perhaps you and I could work together as we once had to unify the relations between my people and yours. And yes,” he added, turning to look at her once more, “I had intended all along to pursue the attraction that had existed once between us, if still it remained.”

“You,” she reminded him slowly, “refused me back then. You pushed me away, kept me apart.”

“Yes,” he admitted in a level tone. “To do otherwise would have compromised too much. I could not risk it.”

“And now?”

“Things are different, or so I believed. As I am certain you have already gleaned, my motives for seeking you out were driven in large part by the necessity to unite Era’Adahlen with the rest of Thedas. But—that was not the sole reason.” Here he paused, watching her expectantly, perhaps waiting for her to voice her blatant disbelief as she would have not so long ago. Instead she chose to remain silent. “In the past, I had only suspected the depth of your affections for me. I could only surmise that after all that has transpired, such attachment would have faded. Upon reading the entries in your journal, however …” He saw her suddenly sour expression and rolled his shoulders in a shrug—what was done was done. “Reading the affirmations that I was correct only furthered my resolve. I had hoped that our time together here would result in the development of something further, something more.”

“Like most my plans,” he continued with an uncharacteristic deprecating edge, sinking down into the nearest chair, “what I had hoped for did not come to pass. The Mien’Harel became more persistent, striking fast and often. I was tethered to my duties, doing whatever I could to assuage human anger and fear, attempting to locate the spies within my own nation, fighting to keep war at bay. What should have been could never be, and finally I was forced into a position I had not wanted for either of us.”

He was speaking of that night, the night the Inquisitor’s existence had been revealed to all of Thedas. “Every small step I had taken toward regaining your trust, every carefully measured word and gesture—it amounted to nothing after that night, as I knew it would. It pained me greatly to throw it all away, but I had no other choice. The Mien’Harel had forced my hand. To delay would have had disastrous consequences. Had I told you the truth of that night … I needed your cooperation, however I could manage to secure it.”

“You have it now,” she said, not without ire.

“Yes,” he agreed ruefully. “A mere shadow of what I had hoped to know from you.”

Greatly daring, she asked, “What exactly had you wanted, Solas?”

He said nothing, sitting motionless, his expression one of faint contrition and regret. He didn’t need to say anything—what he had wanted had already been expressed. He had wanted friendship, intimacy, … love, or some version of it. He had wanted what she had been so willing to give once upon a time, and what she could not possibly give now.
“There remains no further subterfuge between us,” he said, watching as she sank down into the chair next to his. “I would swear it if I thought there was any chance you would believe me. All that remains is the eradication of the Mien’Harel. Once that is done, you will go …”

“I will go,” she agreed softly, wondering at the reluctance she felt when saying those words.

“Then what have I left to lose in regard to you and I?” He shook his head. “It was a suggestion only, Evelyn—the aspiration of a fool.”

She studied him as he returned his gaze to the fire. He looked, she noticed in that moment, utterly wearied. He likely was, given the events that swirled around him on a daily basis. He was the leader of the Elvhenan, responsible for the safety and prosperity of his nation, responsible too for securing alliances and easing tensions between the Elvhen and the rest of Thedas. Just now there had been an earnestness in his voice that made her think of before, when she had been young and dependent upon others, upon him, to counsel her in her darkest hours. She realized that this was Solas as he had been all those years ago when he’d still been her friend, before the truth was revealed between them, before she’d discovered his true face. Other than his word, she had absolutely no reason now to believe that all falsities between them were gone, but she did without question.

She had loved him once, a blind and girlish sort of love, but love nonetheless. And as much as she wanted to bury the fact and wish it into nonexistence, tied up in the knot of emotions she associated with him now that love still existed. It was a frayed remnant of what it had once been, unraveled by the passage of time, by every other negative sentiment Solas brought to the fore. As she regarded him and recalled all that he had been, those words teetered on her tongue, an admission that would damn her beyond any hope for redemption if indeed such a thing still existed for her. It was one thing to say aloud and quite another to reconcile that particular emotion with the decades-old battlefield that lay between them, littered as it was with transgressions and omissions and lies. And there was still the matter of her resentment and her fury, together as formidable a barricade against any sort of intimacy as time and anonymity had once been.

“You ask too much,” she said softly into the quiet that had fallen. “You have taken too much. You keep intending to take. When it’s all gone, when there is nothing left of me to give, I’ll simply be another casualty in your path.”

He closed his eyes. “Fen’Harel ma halem.”

_The Dread wolf ends you._

It was a common and often idle elven threat, one that she’d heard uttered on more than once occasion during her dealings with the Dalish years ago. Solas had not spoken it now as a threat. Instead he had said it with saddened, resigned certainty.

Boone stood. He kept his eyes trained still on the fire. Looking down upon him, she was nearly seized with the urge to reach for him, to pass her hand over the bald expanse of his head, to try and take from him the strains and stresses accumulated from merely being himself. _He lied_, a cold inner voice reminded her in order to temper that urge. _He used._

She left him there, the only sound throughout the room the soft crackling of the fire and her own quiet footsteps. She maintained her own silence as she passed through one door and then another, until she stood under the combined light of torches and the moon. _Maker_, she thought; whether it was a plea or a curse, she did not know. With one finger she wiped slowly at the dampness that lined her eyes, the tears that she refused to let fall.

_Maker, please … help us both._
Dialogue will be the death of me.
4 Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon

Tonight, Skyhold celebrates.

We have slain a dragon. The Northern Hunter, which had been ravaging the already devastated, scattered communities of Crestwood, is no more.

With the Inquisition I have faced many enemies, beyond the scope of what I could have ever conceived. Demons, spirits, darkspawn, Tevinter cultists, the Avvar, the bandits of the Wastes, corrupted wildlife—we have faced them all and emerged victorious. But to face a dragon… I lack the ability to properly describe it. I felt fear foremost, along with an uneasy anticipation. Triumph after it finally fell, but once that had faded, I felt a strange sense of regret. The beast was incredibly hostile, a true terror to all, but it was also a thing of ferocious majesty, a mythological remnant from another time. And now it is dead, by my hand and that of my companions, and even now I believe the Iron Bull means to mount its head as a trophy upon a wall within the Herald’s Rest.

In spite of my regret, I also feel jubilant. The Inquisition has come so far since its inception. We have averted civil wars and foiled assassinations. We have sealed countless rifts. Not every decision I have made as Inquisitor has been without consequence, but from where I stand now I feel as though perhaps despite all odds, that which we stand for is finally making a difference for the better. And now we have slain a dragon, the first of possibly many, and I see it as an indication of greater things to come.

Tonight’s celebration was not planned. Rather it was happenstance, fueled by the news of what we had done earlier today, fanned by the excitement and the disbelief that Inquisition had defeated a dragon. Within hours of return to Skyhold the drinks had begun to flow. Musicians from amongst our ranks began to appear within the main hall, forming a small, makeshift orchestra that played only lively, uplifting songs. The cooks in the kitchen surprised us all with an unexpectedly lavish meal. To my surprise, my advisors took it all in stride (even Cassandra).

Every part of Skyhold was alight with festivity. I found it in the garden, where Maryden had chosen to play ballads about the dragons of old to a small yet enraptured audience. I saw it near the stables, where Blackwall and the Iron Bull were giving a drunken re-enactment of the encounter to a large number of Inquisition soldiers. I witnessed it in the tavern, where Varric and Sera were gleefully instructing Cole on how to fleece strangers in a game of Wicked Grace. In the main hall, where candles flickered and people danced, I watched Josephine, Leliana and Cassandra laugh themselves to tears over an event from their shared past, observed Dorian and Vivienne engage in a spirited conversation that, for once, didn’t involve mutual overtones of haughty indignation and condescension. Even Solas, oft solemn and reclusive, seemed to have been affect by some of the joyous abandonment that had overtaken the keep, drifting from one location to another much like I had, holding a wooden chalice full of wine.

Later in the evening (only a short time ago), after I’d had my fill of eating and drinking and dancing, I found myself in need of a brief respite. I departed the main hall, walking through the rotunda and out onto the battlement. It was bereft of anyone but me, the narrow stone walk illuminated by the wavering glow of torchlight. Leaning with my elbows upon the wall, I looked out over the courtyard of Skyhold. People below were gathered in groups, conversing in loud, buoyant voices that could be
heard over the music drifting forth from the main hall. Skyhold sounded alive, something I had never heard before and in truth, had never expected to hear. I had thought our reality too grim for such frivolity, but I had not taken into account our need for celebration. After everything we’d endured, after all we’d seen, we needed a way to bleed the darkness from our lives. Our defeat of the dragon had given us that opportunity.

My time apart from the rest of the revelers was brief before I was found. “Inquisitor?” a hesitant voice said, and I turned my head to find Cullen approaching from the direction of the keep.

“Commander,” I greeted pleasantly.

“Needed a break from the festivities?” he asked as he joined me in looking out over the courtyard.

I nodded. “A brief one. Too much dancing and too much wine. I wanted to clear my head.”

“I as well,” he said. He took a position that mirrored mine, leaning upon the stone wall of the battlement. “Tonight was needed. It’s provided us all with a boost to morale. I confess to finding it somewhat odd, though; I never thought I’d see a celebration within these walls.”

“Nor I,” I said. “I had just been thinking of that. Skyhold to me represents shelter and safety, solidarity and defense. Not … this,” I indicated the music and the laughing and the general merriment with a wave of my hand.

“The Inquisition is nothing if not full of surprises,” Cullen said with a smile. “And I find myself rather liking this one.”

I hummed my agreement. More surprises like this I would welcome on a daily basis, but somehow I didn’t think we would be so lucky.

“Inquisitor—”

“Evelyn.”

“Evelyn,” he corrected himself quickly. “I had a question for you…”

I awaited the question, and when it didn’t manifest after several moments I glanced at him sidelong. He was staring down at his hands, his brow furrowed, and I felt a sudden pang of concern.

“Cullen?” I ventured.

He looked at me, an uncertain half-smile appearing on his face. “Forgive me,” he said. “I’d rehearsed this before coming up here but it seems I’ve forgot it all. The thing of it is… I—I’ve come to respect you a great deal over the past few months. Or rather, it’s more than simple respect. I admire you. You’ve met every challenge you’ve faced as Inquisitor with determination and grace, made decisions I could not fathom making with as fair and impartial bias as you could. And you are…” here he paused, looking skyward and taking a deep breath. “I find you beautiful,” he said, turning fully to face me. “And I think, even were you not Inquisitor, I would find myself thinking of ways I could be with you, just as I do now. And if you… if you are not opposed to the idea…”

I regarded him out of eyes that felt impossibly wide. Of all the possible things the Commander of the Inquisition’s forces could have possibly said to astound me, this had not even remotely crossed my mind. I was beyond flattered. Some of his feelings toward me were mutual—I respected and admired him as well. And what was more, I liked him. And suddenly the possibility of what he proposed lay stretched out before me, a very real thing. I thought of Solas, of my feelings for him, of the way he had pushed me away after I had kissed him in the Fade. I thought too of the way it pained me sometimes, in mild, fleeting ways, to simply see Solas engaged in the day-to-day and realize I would
never know him beyond companionship. For all the people surrounding me, for all the people I led, my existence was at times a lonely one. Cullen was offering me a reprieve from the hours spent locked inside my own head, second-guessing every decision I made and every action I took.

And so I said, in a voice far softer than I intended it to be, “I’m not opposed.”

I watched a procession of emotions flow across his face: disbelief, shock, amazement, concluding in a smile of such genuine warmth that I could not help but smile back.

“You’re certain?” He asked me, taking a hesitant step toward me.

Was I? Truthfully, no, I wasn’t. But I knew that I would never get the affection I craved from Solas, knew too that mooning over him like a fool would only bring me sorrow and resentment that I didn’t need dogging me as I oversaw the duties of my role. I had only ever viewed Cullen in the light of friendship but now, with his halting, carefully phrased admission still hanging in the air between us, I wondered if that could change.

“I admit to being surprised,” I told him, in the interest of being honest. “This is something I had not expected.”

“I know,” he replied, rubbing at his temple in a nervous gesture. “And Inqui—Evelyn … if nothing comes of this, I assure you there will be no ill will on my behalf.”

“Nor mine,” I told him. “And in the meantime, Cullen, I do look forward to getting to know you better.”

His face lit up with another brilliant smile. “And I you. And to that end, may I request dining with you one evening soon?”

“Of course!”

Cullen gently took my hand in his and brought it to his lips. “Until then. I’m afraid now I must return to the tavern; I promised Varric I’d join him in a game of Wicked Grace.”

“Good luck then, Commander,” I said, and added teasingly, “I do hope you’re able to keep your clothing this time.”

He flushed a delightful shade of crimson at the reminder of that particular game we’d all played some weeks ago. “I’ll do my best to maintain some semblance of dignity,” he told me with an embarrassed grin as he took his leave, and I laughed.

It was also time for me to return to the keep proper. I turned to make my way back to the door leading to the rotunda and stopped short upon seeing Solas standing some several feet away. My immediate thought was to wonder whether he’d seen what had transpired between Cullen and I; my second thought was to remind myself that it didn’t matter if he had.

“Solas,” I said as he began to approach. I couldn’t decipher the expression on his face. He carried still his goblet, and as he set it down upon the battlement’s wall I saw that it was empty.

“I tired of the noise,” he said to me, turning to look out over the courtyard as I had a short time ago.

“There is a lot of it,” I agreed. “But it is well deserved.”

“You and the Commander,” he stated abruptly. “I was not aware of your interest in each other.”
“Neither was I,” I responded slowly, taking a moment to study him. He was still looking out over the open expanse of the keep’s yard, arms folded across his chest. He still wore no expression but I saw that his cheeks were flushed. Whether it was an effect of the alcohol or caused by something else, I could only guess.

“He is certainly a man worthy of the Inquisitor. A proven military strategist with a background as a brave and loyal Templar… you would be hard pressed to find better.”

I distinctly did not like the tone his voice had taken. There was a cruel, caustic edge to it, faint but audible, that both incensed and confused me. “There are few men as commendable as Cullen,” I said sharply.

He did look at me then, turning his head to do so. An unpleasant smile tugged at his lips. “Few human men,” he corrected me.

I felt my eyes narrow. “I have the feeling this has very little at all to do with Cullen.”

“Astute as always, Inquisitor. Though perhaps not in the ways you most need to be.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Instead of answering me, he presented me with a series of questions. “Have you given thought to how such an… arrangement between the two of you could be perceived? Of how others might look upon it? Upon how it might affect your judgment in matters that require a clear mind, free of distractions?”

“I haven’t,” I confessed, and then added angrily, “But like any other living being, I am as deserving of—” I broke off, unwilling to say the word.

“Love?” Solas unhelpfully supplied, one brow lifted in sardonic inquiry.

“Love,” I affirmed, setting my jaw. I had an idea of where this sudden, ridiculous hostility was coming from and if he wanted a fight, well, by the Maker, he was going to get one. “What Cullen and I choose to do is the business of nobody but ourselves.”

“Unless there are consequences for the Inquisition.”

“Even then!” I snapped. “Are you saying I’m not fit for romance, Solas? That this mark on my hand makes me something undesirable? I understand that you might think so, but clearly others do not!”

“You,” he said in a dangerously quiet voice, “have no idea what I think.”

“And I don’t care to!” I nearly shouted. Despite my determination to keep it steady, my voice trembled as I continued. “You pushed me away. You made it more than clear my attention was unwelcome. Whatever I may have felt for you no longer matters.”

“May have?” he asked, stepping close enough to me that I could smell the wine on his breath. “Or still do?”

“You’re drunk.” I said in disgust, pushing past him.

He caught me by the arm before I could go, pulling me around to face him. His other hand captured my chin, holding my face immobile. His gaze imprisoned mine for a string of moments before dropping to my mouth. My breath stilled. And then he wrenched away from me—pushed me away. He ran a hand over his head, staggering backward until he came up against the battlement wall. “I
... Inquisitor, I am sorry. I never meant to—I should not have done that.”

I could only stare at him, mute beneath the tidal wash of my emotions. His expression contorted, profound regret carved into the contours of his face. “Please,” he entreated me in a quiet, shaking voice, “please understand that such a thing between you and I can never be. It would complicate too much. It would hurt too much.”

“It hurts now,” I told him flatly.

He could not even bring himself to meet my eyes.

I left him there, with his apologies and explanations that pained me more than anything he had ever done could. I skirted the main hall by use of Skyhold’s many side corridors and stairwells, and now I sit alone in my room, writing this with a hand that still shakes with the aftershock of what I felt. What I feel, Solas, for all his wisdom, for all his experience, is not above the baser instincts. He is just as prone to petty jealousy as anyone else, for what else could his display tonight have been other than that? I have been a fool in allowing my affections for him to linger, and a bigger fool for indulging him his foul mood tonight. I cannot alter the past, but I can prevent myself from this disappointment and anger by limiting my interactions with him, by focusing my attention on those that matter, and those that care. Whatever doubts I had concerning Cullen’s request are gone now. Even as I am, Anchor and all, I deserve some semblance of happiness. Cullen and I may not be destined for the romance of legends, but there is only one way to know for certain.

.x.

Several days after the ambassadors from the Anderfels and Rivain had departed Era’Adahlen, Boone was summoned by Solas. The male elven retainer who had come for her midday had little to say in the matter, and curious despite herself she accompanied him to the keep. He stopped at the entrance to Solas’ quarters and gestured her to proceed through the closed door. She did so apprehensively, unable to stop speculating on just what he wanted now, gently pushing open the wooden door and slipping through.

She saw Thom before he saw her; her entrance had been a nearly silent one. He was standing in front of Solas, fully armored, his hand resting upon the pommel of his sword where it rode at his hip. He was speaking in a quiet voice, but even from where she stood she could detect the undertones of unbridled fury. Solas was absolutely still, enduring the outburst without any outward sign of emotion, his arms folded across his chest.

Boone took a half-step forward, Thom’s name poised to burst forth from her lips. Solas’ eyes flicked to her as she moved, prompting Thom to turn around.

“Boone,” he said, his voice husky with relief, with anger, with happiness. He met her halfway, his arms around her immediately, pulling her as close as he could despite the hard, unforgiving edges of his armor. They remained thus for a long while, locked in a silent embrace while they struggled to keep their respective emotions under control. He loosed her finally, backing a half-step, looking down upon her with that familiar expression of utter fondness that she cherished so much. She reached up, laying her real hand upon his bearded cheek, smiling when he leaned into her touch.

“You look older,” she teased him, as she always did after he returned from many months away. She fingered a lock of his uneven hair, winding it around her knuckle. “And greyer.”

“I am older,” he told her gruffly, the warmth in his eyes belying his tone.

“You are well?” She asked, stepping back to look him over. “No wounds?”
“None that haven’t already healed.” He took her artificial hand in one of his, lifting it for close inspection, turning it one way and then another, flexing her fingers gently one by one.

Boone debated on what to say, acutely aware that Solas was still in the room, and finally settled for, “A gift.”

Thom grunted. “Lord High and Mighty couldn’t manage to give you your old one back?”

Boone felt her lip twitch and hastily worked to suppress the urge to snicker. Instead she asked, “How did you get here? And when?”

“Through the mirror.” Thom let her hand go. “And not long.”

“You’ve seen Movda?”

“Aye. Though I wasn’t sure I’d be permitted to. His guards didn’t see fit to let me pass at first.”

He’d half-turned as he spoke to look back at Solas, who still stood where he had been when Boone had first entered the room. Solas’ expression as he regarded them both was largely unreadable, though she noticed his mouth had flattened into a thin line, a sure indicator of his ire.

Despite herself, she felt the need to defuse the storm she knew was brewing. “They are there to protect Movda.”

“Protect her? Aye, maybe. And maybe they’re to keep anyone who comes through that mirror from leaving the farm.”

He and Solas were now openly glaring at each other from across the room. The latter said in a clipped voice, “Evelyn has not ventured beyond the city for a reason. She has been informed of the danger the Mien’Harel pose.”

“Her name is Boone,” Thom growled. “And you’re telling me that if she tried to walk out of this city right now with me, your men wouldn’t try to stop her?”

“My people,” Solas replied coldly, “would do only what I’ve asked in order to keep her safe.”

“Your people are the Mien’Harel!”

Boone observed this flaring of tempers wordlessly, half-tempted to insert herself between them, half-tempted to watch it play out. Whatever Thom would say was no less than what Solas deserved; she knew it, Thom knew it, and she was certain that Solas knew it too. Still—she wanted Thom near. If he angered Solas enough, there was a possibility, albeit slight, that Solas would devise a way to keep Boone and her dearest friend separate.

“Thom,” she said, softly pleading.

“I’ve seen what they can do, those elves,” her friend said, glancing at her before returning his attention to Solas. “I saw it in the Marches. We all did. Came across a village two days northeast of the Minanter. It was in ruins, still burning. Every last person that lived there was dead—not just dead. Defiled. Cut apart. Carved. Strung up. These elves, these Mien’Harel—they’re not just rebels. They’re butchers.”

“And they are not my people. They have been disavowed by the ElvHENAN. They are renegades and criminals. They are not elvhen.”
Thom’s lip curled upward in contempt. “Not now, no,” he said. “But they were yours once. You banished them for their crimes once before, didn’t you? Crimes just like this?”

Solas remained silent.

“Aye, they were butchers before you created the Veil, and they’re butchers now. And you set them loose on Thedas. Now you need help cleaning up your little mistake. Human help. Qunari help. Because you can’t deal with this on your own, can you? Your new nation, this new city, all these elves… and you can’t bring a small group of rebels to heel.”

“You have grown most perceptive over the years, Rainier.” Solas voice was level, devoid of any hint of emotion, but Boone could read his anger plainly in the intensity of his stare. “But you hazard guesses now, hurl suspicions without any basis for truth. You are correct in some assumptions and very mistaken in others.”

Thom opened his mouth to deliver a scathing retort, but Solas spoke first, holding up his hand. “Whatever you and I may have had to say to each other has been said. You have come to see Evelyn. Do so. Return through the Eluvian when you are done. Do not make me regret allowing this.” And with that curt directive, the elven leader swiftly exited the room by the same doors through which Boone had entered.

Thom had swiveled to watch him go. His eyes were slits, his mouth pinched tight in thunderous fury. Boone said his name once, twice, and finally he shook his head, expelling a long, loud breath. He raised one of his hands and placed it on her shoulder. His fingers tightened slightly, his touch heavy, as though he wished to lean on her but was trying to resist the urge.

“Tell me you know he hasn’t changed.” His voice was low as he looked at her, wrinkles creasing his brow as he regarded her with such solemnity that she reached up to cover his hand on her shoulder with her own. “Tell me, Boone. Tell me you know he is the same as he ever was… that you won’t be deceived by what he wants you to believe again.”

She couldn’t help but smile as he told her what she knew better than anyone. It was a sad smile, but a smile nonetheless. Thom misread it, gripping her other shoulder, turning her to fully face him. “What he’s done, Boone, there can be no forgiveness. Not from me, not from you, not from anyone in this world. Tell me you know that. Tell me you aren’t…”

She knew what he was asking, knew him well not to mistake the slightest tremble in his low voice for anything but what it was: fear. He was afraid, and not only just for her safety. He was afraid because he had known all those years ago, that she had loved Solas. He was afraid because he thought she might love him now, that she had fallen prey to his unfathomable magic, that she was helpless beneath the weight of his will. There were irrefutable truths layered inside his fears, waiting to be exposed by the erosions of time and circumstance.

Oh Thom, my Thom, she thought then, would that I could have loved you!

He was waiting for her answer, an earnest desperation in his gaze, his fingers squeezing her shoulders. “I know what he is,” she said softly. “I know what he does. You needn’t fear, Thom. I know what he is capable of better than any other.”

He studied her face, looking for an indication that she unknowingly lied, searching for any hint of unwitting deception. He found none in the depths of her russet eyes, saw only a soul-deep weariness tinged with the same guilt and sorrow that had shrouded her for the past decade. He nodded finally, drawing back, letting his hands fall from her shoulders. “News of the Inquisitor reached me the same time your letter did,” he said. “The campaign wasn’t yet over. I left before my contract was up, rode
to Kirkwall to catch the first boat I could.”

“You forfeited the last of your payment?” Boone asked with a concerned frown.

“Bugger the payment,” he said, “And bugger Solas. He can’t keep you here. Come with me now, through the mirror. We’ll take Movda when we go.”

His words were born of impulse, she knew, the desire to see her safely away from Solas’ presence and the barbs that lay strewn within it, barbs which pricked her without mercy at every turn. The elven guard posted at the farm on the Storm Coast was sizable. There was no way that even Thom, battle hardened and experienced as he was, could overpower them. She was trapped within Era’Adahlen as she ever was, as she so deeply feared she would always be.

“I know you can’t,” he admitted a second later, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “But I hate the thought of you here, surrounded by all this. You swear he hasn’t hurt you?”

Not in any way that shows. “He has not,” she replied.

Thom sighed tiredly, passing a hand over his face. “Then I’ll stay with Movda. I’ll see you everyday?”

“You will,” she affirmed, her small smile one of undiluted affection. She stepped past him, beckoning him to follow, and made her way to the chairs before the hearth. She took a seat and watched as he unbuckled his sword belt in order to sit comfortably, draping it over his knees as he did so.

“Tell me of your time away,” she instructed. “Tell me of the the Lord Chancellor and his campaign.”

He indulged her, leaning back in the chair, speaking of his time in the Free Marches in his gravelly voice, the sound one of the most comforting that she had ever known. He and the rest of the mercenaries—nearly two hundred strong—had been hired to deal with marauding bands of darkspawn terrorizing the farmlands in the northeastern Marches. After combating roving bands of the creatures they’d eventually traced their origin to a source, a deep fissure in the highlands, and had set about the daunting task of sealing it in whatever manner they could.

He spoke too of what he’d seen of the Mien’Harel and their work, his tone becoming hushed, suppressed with the recollections of the horrific things he’d seen. Boone had heard as much, of course, from Solas and from those that had come to Era’Adahlen either to voice grievance or to seek alliances, but to hear it from someone who had actually witnessed their atrocities made the facts of the rebel group’s existence even more distressing.

“We tried to track them,” Thom explained, eyes on the blackened logs within the fireplace. “Our trackers weren’t amateurs. All of them veterans. One was Avvar. Whatever these are, these elves who aren’t elves, they move swiftly, and they leave no sign of their passing.”

Thom’s testimony was in line with the reasons Solas had sought help in dealing with the Mien’Harel from without his own nation. Her friend went on to detail the rest of his campaigning after finding no trace of the elven rebels, of how they’d hunted down the last few groups of darkspawn. And then he spoke of hearing the news of the Inquisitor’s reappearance, of how mere hours later her letter had found him, and of how he’d broken his contract with the Lord Chancellor of Tantervale to return to Ferelden.

“And that’s the whole of it,” he concluded. “Rode to the coast this morning. His men wouldn’t let me pass, so they sent someone through that—” he indicated the Eluvian with a thrust of his chin, “to
get permission. I talked to Movda, got her side of it before I came through. Had some choice words with him before you arrived.” He leaned forward, toying with the buckle of his sword belt. “And you? What’s it been like, living here, with all of this?”

She divulged the details of her time in Era’Adahlen, being as honest as she could without revealing the extent of what had transpired between Solas and herself. She knew Thom would suspect; he was too smart not to. She also knew that to reveal the true depths of her emotional entanglement would do nothing but pain her friend more than the current situation already did.

“I also had a visitor,” she remarked after detailing the events of the past few months. “Dorian was here.”

She watched as Thom struggled to suppress his surprise, along with his guilt that his secret was now revealed. Boone let him hang for a few moments before shaking her head with a laugh. “I’m not angry,” she told him, and then added after an exaggerated pause. “Not any longer, at least.”

He gave her a crooked smile, raking his fingers through his beard. “I’m glad you know now. Though I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“I understand why you didn’t. I do.”

Thom nodded, clearly relieved not to be suffering her wrath. “So … Dorian?”

“He was here the night Solas revealed I was still alive. We spoke at length. He told me of your letters, and that you’d sent them to Cassandra and Varric as well.” She paused, shifting in her chair. “Why those three?”

“Because they deserved to know,” he replied. “The others too, but those three you were closest to. You trusted them implicitly, and they you. And… I was not certain then that you and I could evade Solas alone. I thought that if we still had allies, any allies, they could aid us if the need arose.”

“You did well,” she assured him. “And since Dorian’s visit, I’ve heard from both Varric and Cassandra.”

“I wondered if they’d reach out to you in the aftermath of this. What had they to say?”

“Varric says I’m still a Comtesse in Kirkwall and that there is a mansion waiting for me if I want it. Cassandra… she wonders if perhaps I shouldn’t retake my role as Inquisitor. She also says she will see me soon.”

“Not if His Royal Lordship has something to say about it,” Thom said darkly. Boone suppressed a smile. He’d chosen to use Movda’s insolent moniker for Solas.

“Perhaps even then,” she said. “Cassandra is something of a force of nature.”

“She is that,” Thom agreed. “Have you responded to either of them?”

“I have.”

“And you’re certain he sent them?”

“I am.” At Thom’s dubious look, she added, “He cannot deny me everything. We have an … agreement, of sorts. I remain here. I make appearances. And in return—”

“He won’t let you leave.”
“He won’t let me leave,” she agreed. “But, given what you know of the Mien’Harel, and given that they know I am alive and that I am a necessary piece in Solas’ designs, do you truly think I’d be safer elsewhere?” It was a question she had pondered at great length over the past few months, wondering if she would in fact be in danger outside the walls of the city. Thom’s testimonial, along with that of others who had witnessed the carnage of the rebel faction, had led her to conclude that she was. It didn’t lessen her anger at being trapped such as she was, but it was a reality she had been forced to reluctantly accept. “What else is left to me, Thom? If I go, he will follow. He has influence and reach beyond what even I had as Inquisitor. There is nowhere I could hide. Not anymore. I am snared. For me, for now, there is no other possibility.”

Thom made a frustrated sound low in throat and abruptly stood. “Come with me,” he said, “back to farm, for the day.” At her questioning look he added, “I don’t like it here, Boone. It’s… his.”

“I know.” She pushed herself out of the chair and held out her real hand. “Let’s go and remind Movda why she prefers to live alone.”

He smiled, fine lines forming at the corner of his eyes. He threaded his fingers through hers and led her across the room to the Eluvian.

Much, much later, after a sumptuous meal prepared by Movda and many hours spent talking, Boone took her leave. At the threshold to the room which held the mirror she paused, turning to look back at her friends. Thom and Movda were seated before the fire, their chairs close together. Both were asleep; they’d begun nodding off not long before. Boone’s quiet farewell had been sleepily acknowledged. Now Movda’s head rested upon Thom’s shoulder as she dozed. Thom’s head had fallen back and he was snoring softly.

The scene before her warmed her heart as nothing else ever would. It was the perfect representation of what home meant to her, a moment of pure comfort imprinted upon her mind. She loved them and they her and together the three of them were a family formed from chaos, built from shambles, that had weathered time and circumstance. Smiling fondly as Thom’s snoring reached a crescendo, she left the sleeping duo and returned through the Eluvian.

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Chapter End Notes

There are some things I need to say regarding this story moving forward.

In the interest of keeping any of you reading this from unpleasant surprises, I have to warn you that from this point forward this story takes a serious turn. It’s going to get dark. Consider this a trigger warning for physical violence and mental abuse.

I also need to warn those of you who revile my portrayal of Solas that you may not want to read beyond this point. I appreciate everyone who’s read this far (more than I can say) and all your feedback, but I completely understand what it’s like when a book you enjoy takes a sharp turn into territory you’re not comfortable with.

All of my gratitude to everyone who's stuck with me throughout this. You keep me going.
Evelyn,

The tale of what transpired between you and I in the Crossroads shall undoubtedly go untold. I will not speak of it; I am certain you will take the details of our encounter to your grave. I am recording the memory in this letter while it is still clear and vivid within my mind. In the future, when my task is done and my people are restored, I shall revisit it as I do all the others I have written. Though our last encounter wasn’t what I would have wished, it is still a memory of you and thus, something I must cherish.

The path I laid for you to follow so recently was not an easy one. It was labyrinthine by design, leading you to remnants of my history. I intended you unravel the entirety of the Qunari plot on your own, though it was my agent that set you in that direction initially. While I had never intended you uncover the truth of my identity, I am not surprised you managed to do so. Your resourcefulness is and always has been something I’ve admired.

The speed with which you defeated the Qunari agents set in your path was impressive. I had underestimated you yet again, and hearing your voice after I had dealt with the Viddasala in truth startled me. I turned to find you there, bloodied from your battle with the Saarebas Saraath, bow in hand and an expression I could not decipher upon your face. Seeing you shook me — it had been years since I had looked fully upon you. You had changed in some ways—your dark hair, which you had kept short during my time in the Inquisition, had been allowed to grow. You wore armor I had never seen, wielded a bow of legend I recognized from ancient Tevinter tales. Since we had parted ways I had thought of you often — no, more than that. You were a constant in my thoughts, shadowing my every step, an apparition I did not want to banish even though I knew I should.

We regarded each other in silence. You were so still, your eyes shuttered. I had known I would see you again eventually, but not this soon and not here, in the world that bridged reality and dreams. The Anchor on your palm flared suddenly and so intensely I could feel it even from where I stood, and with a muted cry you fell to your knees. You dropped your bow, clutching your afflicted arm as it glowed with an insidious light. The Anchor was killing you, and it was doing so far quicker than I had anticipated.

I drew closer to you and tamed the Anchor with a thought. Panting from the aftermath, you looked up at me. “That should give us more time,” I said. “I suspect you have questions.”

You got to your feet slowly. When you spoke your voice was hollow, devoid of anything to give me a hint into what you were thinking. “The Qunari answered some of those questions. The information I found while traveling through the eluvians answered more. You’re Fen’Harel. You’re the Dread Wolf.”

And there it was — the secret I had kept from you all, the story of my origin. It was a tale convoluted by eons, altered through innumerable tellings and polluted by bias. And in that moment, standing before you bearing the mantle of my true nature, I was beset by more than just surprise that you had ferreted out the truth. For a fleeting moment I felt something akin to vulnerability, accompanied by an unexpected sense of relief. For so long I had lived only as Solas. It had been a lonely existence, mostly by choice but also by circumstance. That a person I so deeply cared for finally knew who I really was was comforting in a way I could never have expected.

You were silent for a long while, your face still an expressionless mask. And then: “You lied to me.”

“Only by omission.”

You laughed outright and it was an ugly, cutting sound. “Such a typical Solas response! You lie to me even now but have the audacity to claim otherwise. I suppose your hubris affords you that.” You took a step closer to me and I saw it then, the rage that had wholly claimed you. It was evident in the rigid set of your jaw, in the tight, sharp breaths you took, glinting in the depths of your narrowed eyes.

“You lied. You used me. You used the Inquisition. Those scattered bits of history I discovered depicted you as a hero, a rebel fighting for a greater cause — and all of it lies. Manipulation and deception on this scale are not the attributes of a hero.”

“I never claimed to be such. What you’ve seen is a story written in desperation to give me more credit than I ever deserved.”

A sound escaped you, a low rasp of fury, of betrayal, of hurt. You moved away from me, shaking your head, before abruptly spinning back around. “You could have trusted me! I was your friend, Solas! I was—” Here you stopped, swallowing words, words I suspected I knew, words that I so longed to hear. You held out both hands, palms up, and took one step toward me. Your next words trembled. “What would you have lost by trusting me with this truth?”

Everything, I wanted to say. Confiding in you would have undone me. I would have lost myself in you and by doing so, lost my sense of purpose. I could not risk it. I could not risk loving you. I didn’t answer your question aloud, instead opting to offer you an explanation, or as much of one as I could. “I sought to set my people free from would-be gods. I broke the chains of all who wished to join me. The false gods called me Fen’Harel, and when they finally went to far, I formed the Veil and banished them forever. Thus I freed the Elvhen people and in doing so, destroyed their world.”

“The Veil,” you whispered. “You created it?”

“Yes.”

“Explain.” Your tone had become blunt, commanding. “How did creating the Veil destroy the world?”

“You saw the remains of Vir Dirthara. The library was intrinsically tied to the Fade and the Veil destroyed it. There were countless other marvels, all dependent on the presence of the Fade, all destroyed. The elven legends of immortality? All true. It was not the arrival of humans that caused us to start aging. It was me. The Veil took everything from the elves, even themselves.”

The admission of my greatest crime and failure hung in the air between us, a secret that had poisoned my spirit for eons. I had watched you carefully as I spoke but your expression had blanked again, leaving me with no indication as to your thoughts, though it wasn’t hard to guess what they were.

“Afterward,” I continued, “I lay in dark and dreaming sleep while countless wars and ages passed. I woke still weak a year before I joined you. My people fell for what I did to strike the Evanuris down, but still some hope remains for restoration. I will save the elven people, even if it means the
world must die.”

You closed your eyes. When you opened them again long moments later they were brimming with tears. “This has been your intent this entire time? To use the Anchor—to use me—to this end?”

I could not lie to you then but you must believe me, Evelyn, I wished I could. I wished I could erase the betrayal from your mind, to remove the pain I’d caused from you. And I considered doing so—yes, that is within my power. I could have altered your memories then and there. I could have changed history as you knew it, remade all you had learned into something less damning. And oh, but I wanted to. I wanted to reshape it all into a reality where I was free to be with you as I so fervently wanted to be. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t do that to you. In doing so I would have irrevocably altered you, committing yet another unforgivable sin.

And so I answered you as logic dictated I must, striving to keep my voice even despite the way my thoughts and emotions warred within me. “Yes.”

A part of you broke at that moment, I am certain. You twisted away from me, but not before I saw the tears fall. I stepped toward you and reached for you before I had even realized it. With great effort I reigned in the urge, watched as your shoulders rose and fell sharply as you wrestled for control.

“You believe this world dying is the answer?” You spoke with your back still to me. “Not a good answer, no. Sometimes terrible choices are all that remain.”

“Terrible choices,” you echoed, turning. I had never seen you like this before. You were sundered, thoroughly and completely and solely by my hand. I believe that if you had said my name in that moment I would have gone to you. I would have taken you in my arms and whispered to you my regrets, my guilt, my apologies. I would have begged your forgiveness, Evelyn. But you said nothing. You did nothing. You simply waited, your only movement the blinking of your dark eyes. And I must give you my bitter thanks for that, for it allowed me to continue without crumbling.

“It is my fight,” I said, striving to maintain my resolve, the resolve that had carried me this far. “You should be more concerned about the Inquisition. Your Inquisition. In stopping the Dragon’s Breath you have prevented an invasion by Qunari forces. With luck they will return their focus to Tevinter. That should give you a few years of relative peace.”

You laughed. It was disconcerting, a jagged, distorted laugh of abject misery. “You are no different than Corypheus.”

It was my turn to close my eyes briefly, to disguise the pain your words caused. You were right in that assumption, but I could not admit it openly, not to you. “I am not Corypheus. I take no joy in this. But the return of my people means the end of yours.”

Another long silence. It was difficult to hold your gaze, direct and inescapable as it was. “Your orb,” you said finally. “If things had not happened as they did? If I had not been there, if Corypheus had died?”

“I would have entered the Fade using the mark you now bear. Then I would have torn down the Veil. As this world burned in raw chaos I would have restored the world of my time. The world of the elves.”

You began to move toward me, one slow step at a time. Your gait was uneven and I thought you might stumble, but you did not. You halted before me and I remained unmoving as your eyes intently...
searched my face — you were looking, I knew, for any sign of uncertainty, for any indicator of remorse. I could not show those to you. I endured your gaze as though I were made of stone. You tried to strike me then. I saw the flicker in your eyes before you moved. I caught your hand with mine before it connected, but it seems you were capable of surprising me still—it had been a feint. As I gripped the hand that bore the Anchor, you struck out with the other. It was a hard blow and it struck true. I loosed you and staggered back two steps, reaching up to probe at the pain that had blossomed across my jaw.

“You should have killed me when you found me with the Anchor,” you said, mouth twisting as you spat the words. “You could have done yourself a favor in the long run. Why spare me? All you had to do was remove it from me and your plan would have corrected itself.”

I moved my jaw experimentally, tasting blood. You had not pulled that particular punch. It was no more than I deserved. Wiping at the blood on my mouth with one hand, I answered you, “I was too weak to remove it at that time. My only option was to attach myself to the Inquisition and aid you in closing the Breach.”

“Attach yourself to the Inquisition and to me. Was it your intent I develop feelings toward you as well?” You answered your own question before I could, replying with such bitterness that it turned your voice into a raw, wounded sound. “No, that was all my folly. My own fucking stupidity.”

“I told you such a thing could never be.” I reminded you unnecessarily. The lividness in your eyes then should have melted me where I stood. I half wished it would.

“And yet you were always there, Solas! Always confusing me, always saying one thing and doing the other. You could have avoided me entirely, shut me out, never spoken another word to me! But you did. You did. You spoke to me and advised me and you made the effort to be a friend to me and all the while you were plotting to turn on me and the rest of the world. How? How. Tell me how.”

You were moving again, your strides rigid as you circled me. “How could you pretend the way you did? How could you speak to us all, speak to me, as though you were nothing more than a mere apostate? Were we nothing to you? Less than nothing?”

“You were people, and you deserved better,” I admitted, half-turning to watch you as you walked, “like all the rest I have used in one hopeless battle after another.”

You completed your circuit, stopping in front of me once again. “There is no stopping you in this.”

It was less of a question than a statement. “No.”

I read the flow of your thoughts across your expressive face. It was often a struggle for you, you’d confided in me once, to hide what you were thinking. That you had managed to do so here and now for this long was a testament to the control you’d been exerting. It had finally failed you. I saw anguish etched into every line of your face and profound, helpless fury in your wide eyes. I could not stop myself from speaking, from keeping the unspoken plea from my words. “They are my people, Evelyn. They deserve better than to live as tattered memories of what they once were. I took immortality from them; I can give it back.”

“And what of my people? Of the Qunari? Of the dwarves?”

I would not give you that answer.

In the silence that fell then I imagined I could see the memories you were reliving in that moment, the things I’d said, the things I’d done. You were examining them all, searching for whatever minute
details you had missed that could have prevented this outcome. There were none, but it wouldn’t stop you from looking. It wouldn’t stop you from experiencing the doubt and the guilt that would now dog you for the rest of your life.

Perhaps spurred into activity by the tumult of what you’d just endured, the Anchor flared again. Its light was blinding; I was forced to look away. Your tortured cry echoed throughout the vast, empty space surrounding us. When the light had faded I found you on your knees, hunched over with your offending arm cradled by the other.

“And what of this?” You asked me raggedly when you could again speak through the pain.

“It’s killing you.”

“As you intended.”

“No.” It was here my voice finally broke. I knelt at your side “No, Evelyn. I never intended for you to die.”

“And yet you’ve watched all these years as this magic, your magic, has done this to me?”

“I knew we would meet again.” The baleful way you looked up at me then wounded me to the quick. Strands of your dark hair had come loose from your braid and I could not control the urge I had then to brush them back, away from your face. You twisted your head away from my touch. I cannot fault you for that.

“When? When the Anchor had sapped me of all strength and a will to live?”

“No.” I murmured. “Before then.”

I reached for you, gripped your wrist. I expected a struggle but you gave me none. I could feel the power of the Anchor writhing beneath my fingertips as it struggled to free itself from the confines of flesh that had finally become too limited. Left untended it would continue to consume your body bit by agonizing bit until all that was left was a brittle, blackened husk. In truth, I could not remove the Anchor. It was too firmly embedded within you now for extraction. What I could do, what I had to do, was seal it within the flesh already tainted by its presence, preventing it from spreading any further.

I did so, swiftly and without warning, with a slice of my hand. You cried out again; I silenced the cry with my mouth on yours. It was another urge I was helpless to resist, to kiss you as I’d longed to do for so very long, since that night in the dream we’d shared years ago. I kissed you and did not relent until we were both breathless, and then I pulled away. We regarded each other for a long span of moments, your eyes still wide and damp and so full of emotion that I felt my heart seize. It would have been so easy to reach for you again, to wipe away the tears lining your eyes and whisper the words of comfort you needed to hear, the words I wanted to say. I couldn’t. For the sake of the future I need to create, I had to push everything I felt for you aside.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done.

I mustered my voice. It took a monumental amount of effort to keep it from breaking again. “You have decisions to make now.”

My words were the final blow to complete the fracturing of your self. I watched it happen, as you jerked backward, as something cold and dismal shrouded the depths of your eyes. You stood, cradling your now blackened arm close to your chest. I rose as well, moving away, needing the distance between us to maintain the clarity that had carried me this far.
“Decisions that should never have been mine to make,” you replied slowly. “Yet another thing to thank you for.”

You took one step back, and then another. With a final, defeated shake of your head you turned your back on me.

“Return me.” Your voice was lifeless. “Send me back.”

I returned you to Halam’shiral, to your companions that cared for you better than I ever could, to your friends who would never have betrayed you as I have. There you remained for a single day, disbanding the Inquisition amid an uproar from the peers of the realm — all this I know, for my spies are prolific and well entrenched. But after that you vanished and not even my most trusted agents could find any indication of you. I expected your rage, Evelyn. I expected your sorrow. I expected that you would rally yourself from my betrayal and would throw yourself into finding a way to prevent me from completing my goal. I expected that you may even attempt to save me from myself. Both would have led to your defeat.

But this disappearance I did not expect. My agents have dug deep and traveled far searching for any indication of you. There is none. I do not believe you are dead. Have you relied on some manner of sorcery to slip away, to find a place to lie low in order to build your resistance? That is the most rational conclusion. But something about this makes me uneasy. It is not like you. I have wounded you greatly, Evelyn, and used you most cruelly, but you are a part of me now despite my every effort to prevent it from happening. You are vital in ways I do not fully understand yet. And so I will keep searching for you even as I move forward with my preparations. I will find you again one day. It is only a matter of time.

Until then, be safe. Live as well as you can and endure what must come. I could not say it aloud to you, but I can write it here—

Ar lath ma.

Chapter End Notes

So, after my last update (almost a year ago), I left you all with a warning that things were going to get dark. Since then I’ve done some major rearranging/overhauling of the plot. The grim stuff is still coming.

I apologize for the time between updating. Life got in the way, as it does. Other fandoms caught my eye. After watching the DA4 teaser (and hearing Solas’ voice) I rediscovered my inspiration for this fic (and then some). The next chapter is almost finished, as I’ve been working on it off and on for the last year. Hope to have it up before Christmas.

To all of you who make a point of checking in with me when I drift away from this: Thank you. Sometimes your messages are just what I need to come back and start poking at this again.
What we become by fire’s light

Chapter Notes

Super mega huge thanks to Silenceatemycat for beta reading and input on this chapter (and hopefully all the rest)! It was exactly what I needed to work past the problem areas.

PLEASE NOTE: There's some mature stuff in this chapter, so consider yourselves warned.

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It was yet another night of hosting visiting dignitaries. Boone had grown almost numb to these occasions. No longer did the pointed stares or inquiring whispers concerning her presence bother her. She was Evelyn Trevelyan to those that did not know her; to everyone else, to those that mattered, she was still and always Boone.

It had been a month since Thom’s reappearance, a month since the Rivaini noblewoman had mentioned the possibility of Boone becoming the consort of the High Keeper of the Elvhenan. In that month she had done her best to become as close to ghostlike as possible within Era’Adahlen. She had ceased her daily forays throughout the city, ceased her visits to the library of Enansal Vir. Instead she spent as much time as possible on the other side of the Eluvian, away from Solas, away too from the pressure of his scheming. She had no doubt he’d noticed her efforts at becoming largely invisible, but the warning she half-feared never came. He had not spoken to her at all since the day Thom had arrived. She was conflicted on that particular issue but refused to examine it any further for fear of what exactly it would reveal. Despite their lack of communication, she still attended state and national affairs, knowing that if she did not it would be the catalyst to another confrontation. She continued to play her role as she had agreed to do, being seen but remaining silent.

This feast was no different than the others. Instead of entertaining foreign people of importance, the guests of honor were various nobles from within Ferelden. Banns, Teyrns, Arls, knights, and freeholders were all present, many having set foot for the first time within the recently established borders of the Elvhenan. It was a crowd that made Boone acutely uncomfortable. In her time as Inquisitor she’d dealt almost exclusively with the leaders of both Ferelden and Orlais.

As though sensing her mounting tension as this eve had approached, Irithala had designed yet another impressive gown. It was cloth of gold, a fabric Boone had only ever heard of before this, known to be an extravagance most in Thedas could not afford. Boone was certain Solas was making a statement with his procurement of such finery and considered refusing to wear the final creation to make a counter statement. In the end she capitulated, knowing that to refuse would only disappoint Irithala. It was of some comfort that the gown was beautifully constructed, a full skirt falling from the fitted bodice, the sleeves dagged and trailing. She wore no jewelry, only a girdle of thin golden links that rode low around the hips, also supplied by Irithala. Boone did not care to inquire whether it too had been given to her by Solas.

As had become tradition, Boone endured the feast seated by Solas’ side. They did not speak to each other. Boone ate and drank and smiled at the female Elvhen Keeper sitting on her other side, making an effort to maintain her mask of artless cheer. When the entire ordeal was done hours later, Boone
withdrew to the fringes of the main hall as she usually did in order to watch what would follow from afar. Tonight was to be different from all other occasions of this nature in one significant regard: the feast would be followed by dancing. It struck her as odd to have a ball given the delicate nature of relations between Ferelden and the Elvhenan, but then was forced to amend that thought. The nature of relations really wasn’t that delicate, not anymore, not since the Inquisitor had been rediscovered and publicly announced her support that humans and elvhen work together to defeat the Mien’Harel.

And so she watched as the remnants of dinner were cleared from the hall and as the tables and chairs were moved and reorganized with remarkable swiftness. She watched as a small orchestra assembled on the now empty main dais, and noted with impressed surprise that the members were both human and elvhen. She watched as they began to play a stately waltz, watched as the crowd that lingered on the edges of the room moved about and gradually merged into couples and groups, watched as for the first time in thousands of years, nobility of both races danced beneath the banners of the Elvhenan. Boone found a chair in an unoccupied corner of the hall and sat, folding her hands in her lap and leaning back. The uncertain tension from earlier in the evening slowly dissolved, driven away by the universal gaiety found in dancing of most any nature. Where faces had been implacable and shuttered, smiles burgeoned. Quiet voices shed the shackles of restraint, rising into laughter and merry banter. Boone, observing the transformation, mused that Solas would have been better suited to host a ball far earlier in his game.

She measured the passage of time through dances and the ever-changing procession of songs. She was not immune to the general mood; she nodded her head and tapped her feet in time to the music. Eventually, driven by thirst, she rose to her feet and navigated the crowd until she found a steward standing next to a small square table full of simple but elegant pewter goblets. At her request the steward handed her one full of the lighter fruit wines she preferred, and with a murmured thanks she turned and raised the cup to her lips.

“Lady Trevelyan,” said a man’s voice from beside her. Hastily swallowing her first sip of wine, she turned and smiled inquiringly at the speaker. He was a shorter man, robust in build, his ruddy face framed by a thick ruff of graying beard. He wore the colors of Edgehall but clearly wasn’t the Arl. A lord or knight, perhaps.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Boone said politely, though inwardly she wished he would go away so that she could return to her corner to observe.

“Hailen Farthel,” replied the man, bending in a half-bow, “of Edgehall.”

“My lord,” she said, an assumption on her part as he’d given her no official title. She returned the bow.

“Would you care to dance?” He asked without further preamble.

Boone hesitated. She’d known the request would come eventually. She had once been the Inquisitor and now appeared to exist in an advisory role to the leader of the Elvhenan. People would seek her out simply because of who she was, hoping to win her over with gallant manners or through clever conversational tactics. She had no desire to be on the receiving end of either, but was also aware that to refuse would not endear her to the human political envoys present here tonight.

“I ask only for a dance,” Hailen Farthel clarified, correctly interpreting her hesitation, “a dance with a beautiful woman. I’ve no ulterior reasons for asking. Not one word of political nature will pass my lips. I solemnly swear it.”

Boone couldn’t help but smile. “Very well,” she agreed, and extended her hand. He took it, bowed over it, and turned to escort to the dance floor.
Hailen Farthel was shorter than Boone, enough so that she was able to look down at him as he placed one hand on her waist and clasped her own hand in the other. As the next song began he began to lead them in the dance while remaining a respectful distance apart, which Boone appreciated. As part of the whirling throng they moved, and keeping true to his promise he engaged her only in polite conversation. She was not unaware as they danced of the inquiring and speculative glances sent their way and knew only too well that more than a few people were wondering just who Hailen Farthel was that he’d garnered a dance from Lady Evelyn Trevelyan. Farthel was aware of those looks, too, and he met Boone’s eyes with a grin.

“I found this all rather dull,” he confessed to her, leaning in closer so that his words carried over the music and the voices, “so I thought, why not give them something to gossip about? I, an old fat knight whose days of service are long behind him and you, the former Inquisitor - tongues are really wagging now. Now they must all know why you would deign to dance with me, of everyone else here tonight?”

“But you’re honest,” Boone replied with wry candor. “Because you smiled. Because you don’t look at me like the others do.”

“Oh?” Farthel asked, spinning them both about with a deftness that belied his bulk. “And how do they look at you?”

Boone shook her head. “You know exactly how. You’ve seen it as we’ve danced.”

“With speculation and suspicion and doubt,” he said, “and admiration and curiosity and pride.”

She laughed outright. “I’ll agree to all of those save admiration and pride.”

Farthel was smiling again. “Then you are blind, Lady Trevelyan. Or more likely, you only choose to see what you expect to see.”

His words sounded far too similar to things had Solas had said in the not so distant past. Her smile dimmed but held. Farthel, intuiting the shift in mood, began to speak of other trivial, less complicated things. Boone listened to him speak, grateful for this small kindness, all too content to focus only on the sound of his voice and the movements dictated by the music. As part of the crowd they moved, their surroundings a kaleidoscope of bright colors and smiling or speculative faces. Boone ignored them as she’d become so adept at doing, determined at best to enjoy what would likely be her one and only turn around the floor this night.

Another of Farthel’s sardonic observations prompted an unexpected laugh from Boone, and she craned her head around to try and see the person he spoke of. In the throng of moving faces, only one stood out to her — Solas. And he wasn’t alone, she realized as the dancing carried them closer. He was paired with a young human woman clad in a gown of deep orange and burnished copper. Boone recognized the lady by merit of her distinct dress; she was the eldest daughter of the Teryn of Gwaren. It is nothing to me, Boone forced herself to think. I feel nothing. And for the most fleeting of moments she thought she’d successfully convinced herself—until she watched as the young human noblewoman lunge upward on tiptoe to kiss Solas square on the mouth with a careless impulsiveness that would undoubtedly have her chaperones reeling with outrage and mortification.

Boone twisted physically to the side, unable to witness more. The music ended almost simultaneously. She wanted to rip free of Hailen Farthel’s hold and hurl herself through the crowd, to seek an escape from the grips of an emotion she hadn’t experienced for a very long time. Instead she schooled her face into an expression she hoped would pass as pleasant and smiled woodenly as the old knight of Edgehall bowed low over her hand.
“Thank you for the dance, Lady Trevelyan,” he said. She saw in his face as he straightened that despite her efforts, he had noticed her sudden sadness.

“It was my pleasure,” she said automatically, and was beyond relieved when he merely nodded and released her hand.

A new song had started, a livelier waltz this time. Boone navigated her way through the dancing couples with a determination more suited to the battlefields she’d once walked. All the while her thoughts circled, reviewing Solas and noblewoman, of that kiss and the myriad reasons it troubled her so when it shouldn’t. She wouldn’t pretend it was something it wasn’t; it was jealousy — stark, unexpected, unwanted, and accompanying it an envy that shook her to the core.

“Lady Trevelyan —” someone began as she passed, and she felt fingers on her shoulder. She sidled away, using the crowd to her advantage, unwilling to engage anyone else in conversation, unwilling to pretend any longer. She felt another unwelcome touch, fingers going about her wrist, and she spun about with a polite albeit desperate refusal poised to fall from her lips.

“One dance,” Solas said before she could speak, his fingers sliding from her wrist downward to clasp her flesh and blood hand. He read the immediate refusal in her eyes and bent so that their foreheads were almost touching. “Please,” he entreated softly.

She was already certain that he knew she’d seen the kiss from the noblewoman, also certain that he knew exactly how she felt about it. She didn’t push him away, couldn’t — there were far too many eyes upon them now, onlookers eager and curious to see this rare type of interaction between High Keeper and once-Inquisitor. She bobbed her head in silent acquiescence and tried only to concentrate on presenting the front of a functional living being as his arm went around her waist. He began to move and so did she, following the commands of the music. For a while, it was just this, just dancing, her hand on his shoulder and his at the small of her back, her eyes darting around the room because of what she feared to see in his gaze. A flash of bright orange caught her eye, and she saw the daughter of the Teryn dancing with someone indistinguishable for the activity of the crowd.

“She’s a foolish girl,” Solas remarked, noting where Boone’s gaze had been as he turned them both. “Young and very naive.”

“And ambitious,” Boone could not help but say.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps she simply found herself caught up in the mood of the evening.”

Boone’s eyes did meet his, then. “She is the daughter of a Teryn,” she said baldly. “There could be no better match afforded you than if King Alistair himself offered the hand of his own daughter.”

“I don’t want the hand of a king’s daughter.”

The intensity of his expression dared her to ask him why, but she shook her head, instead saying, “I think perhaps it is you being foolish.”

“It is possible. I often find myself behaving foolishly when I’m around you.”

He was smiling a little, and she found she could not help but smile back. He asked, sweeping them into another turn, “Do you remember the last time we danced?”

“Yes. The Eve of First Day, at Skyhold.”

“You trod on my foot.”
“Accidentally. But you stopped me from falling and I was grateful to be spared from public humiliation.”

He chuckled. “You could have knocked me over and it wouldn’t have mattered. Everyone was strictly devoted to revelry that night.”

Her smile had widened as she thought back to that night years ago, when she’d been emboldened enough by wine and cider to ask Solas to dance. There were other memories attached to that one, of things he’d said, of the gift he’d given her. That was the night she’d first realized she loved him. He watched as the mirth of remembrance faded from her face, watched as her expression abruptly sobered.

“We have not spoken like this in quite some time,” he commented then, his tone almost conversational. “You’re scarcely to be seen in the city of late. Movda and Rainier are fortunate to be in your company so often.”

His accusation was mild, but there nonetheless. “They are my friends,” she said evenly. “I have none in this city.”

“What of Irithala?”

“She is a wonderful girl and I am grateful to know her, but it’s not the same and you know it.”

He ceded that point with a tip of his head. He asked, “And what of me?”

“You are my ... host.”

His brows descended into a frown. “What am I to you other than that? No, I already know how you will answer. You’ll say anything except for how you actually feel.”

Boone did not want another fight with Solas. She was tired of being forever at odds with him, tired of bandying words back and forth that always hurt but never changed. “There is too much for you and I to overcome,” she explained in an almost whisper, afraid to raise her voice too much. “Still you persist. Solas, we are—”

“Friends,” he interrupted, his voice just as soft, “and confidantes, once. Trusting of each other.”

“But not completely. Never completely. Your trust in me never went so far as to tell me who you really were.”

He looked away at that, eyes skimming over the others locked in perpetual motion around them, unable to refute that particular truth. Boone continued with an unfamiliar boldness, “Never enough to tell me why you couldn’t love me as I was so willing to love you.”

“But I did love you,” he said soberly, eyes flicking back to her face. “I still do.”

She felt a peculiar falling sensation with his unexpected admission — part euphoria, part dread, and fragments of myriad other emotions too numerous to sort and identify. “You love your people,” she gently corrected him, “and you love your nation. You love what you have built and remade and rightfully so, for it is all of it a marvel.”

“And in loving those things, I cannot love you?”

“Have you?” She challenged him, fighting to make her voice heard while at the same time struggling to keep it contained. Around them couples danced, lost in merriment, unaware of what transpired in
“You have used me. You have hurt me. You have lied to me, manipulated me, confined me. So tell me, Solas, is that what you have given to me during my time here? Love?”

“Yes.” His reply was swift, immediate, resolute. “Though I have not done it well, not as you deserve.”

“As I deserve,” Boone said, her voice twisting. “Of all the many things you and I deserve, love is not among them.”

“But it is here regardless,” Solas said, leaning in close again, so that she could feel his breath warm against her skin. “And I offer it to you now — will continue offering it to you. If you would let me, Evelyn—”

“Stop.” she said, breathless but not from dancing.

“No.” He pulled her with him into an effortless turn and they whirled between other dancers, a dizzying array of colors and movement and voices surrounding them. And suddenly he was closer, his arm about her waist tightening. He lowered his head until his mouth was next to her ear; she felt the brush of his lips there as he spoke. “I will not force you to remain when it is over. I won’t keep you captive here. But I will speak to you of what I feel, Evelyn, and you will listen. You must. Please.”

His voice trembled on the last word. Evelyn closed her eyes briefly, focusing on the steps of the dance. He was close, so close, and it took very little effort at all for her to drop her head ever so slightly until it rested on his shoulder. He inhaled suddenly, deeply; she felt his body move with the force of it. People would see, she knew. People would see and gossip would spread and she would be trapped within the cage of public opinion once more.

“I cannot,” she said with a greater reluctance than she would ever admit, raising her head.

“You will not, you mean.” His voice had hardened.

“However you wish to think of it. I’ve listened to you before, Solas, but you never seem to listen to me when I speak. What you hope for, what you speak of—”

“You want it too.”

“Yes,” she admitted, shocking herself. She’d shocked him too; his eyes widened. He’d expected another instinctively contrary response. “But wanting something doesn’t mean that it is meant to be.”

The song tapered off abruptly, ending on a series of five descending notes. Boone immediately stepped back. Solas’ hands fell away. They regarded each other unmoving in the midst of activity for a span of moments until she could finally bring herself to move. “Thank you for the dance, High Keeper.” She punctuated her words with a formal half-bow.

“Lady Trevelyan,” he said in return. She didn’t bother searching his face for the frustration she knew would be there; she heard it in his tone. Taking advantage of the many guests milling about while waiting for the next song, Boone swiftly made her exit from the floor.

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A short time later, well within what privacy her rooms afforded her, Boone removed all her formal trappings. Sometimes Irithala aided her in this, particularly with the gowns of a more complex construction, but tonight Boone craved isolation. She moved slowly, taking off the girdle first and laying it carefully upon the small table. She disrobed next, taking great pains not to damage the
fabric, and when that was done she hung the gown from two wooden hooks attached to one of the walls in her room. She donned the simple shift she slept in before moving to the small dressing table, pulling the many pins out of her hair as she did so. Once it was unbound she slowly brushed out the length, wandering back into the main room as she did so. She paused before the bank of windows that overlooked the city, lost deep in thoughts of Solas and dancing, of love and all that challenged it.

Minutes passed. Abruptly she stopped brushing her hair, taking several quick steps forward until she was directly before the windows. There was an orange glow in the distance near the edge of the city, silhouetting buildings. It was growing steadily. Boone opened the door to the balcony and stepped through, peering into the dark. Realization propelled her backward, off the balcony, and she watched through the open door as the orange glow developed into something alarmingly recognizable.

The city was on fire.

Boone whipped around, dropping the brush and running into her room. She dressed quickly in one of her plain day-to-day dresses, hastily slipping her kidskin slippers onto her feet. As she moved quickly through her rooms she cast another alarmed glance out the window. The glow was much brighter now. Sounds of chaos were filtering in from the distance, shouts and indistinct clamoring. She pulled the door to her quarters open and immediately stepped back, startled.

“Abelas,” she said.

The Elvhen soldier, clad as he ever was in his burnished armor from eons past, beckoned for her to step out the door. “Come. Quickly. I am to escort you to the keep.”

She complied, shutting the door behind her. He set off across the bridge at a pace brisk enough to have her running behind him. “What is happening?” she asked, eyes darting to the fire.

“The Mien’Harel.” was his terse reply.

“Are they responsible for the fire? How many are there? How were they able to get inside the walls?”

Abelas did not answer her questions, instead stopping only long enough to grasp her by the arm and haul her with him. Together they raced toward the dark, looming shape of Enansal Vir. The sounds of panic and fear were far more audible now, voices rising and falling against the constant soft roar of the fire. Upon reaching the keep Abelas led her unerringly into its depths, maintaining his tight hold on her arm.

“Where is Solas?” she asked breathlessly as the navigated the many corridors.

“Dealing with the enemy,” he said, finally slowing to a halt as they approached the doors to Solas’ rooms. He shoved one door open and briskly gestured her through. Once inside, he moved with quick strides through the study and into the short hall connected to it, turned right, and led her into another room, one she’d never entered before. It was a small chamber, devoid of everything save a bookshelf and a large mirror anchored to one wall.

“Enter that eluvian,” he directed, pointing. “Fen’Harel will come for you once all is dealt with.”

“If there is anything I can do here …” She thought on the citizens of the city beset by the fire, by the surprise attack. People would die this night and yet she was about to flee through an eluvian. She did not care for the idea.

“There is not.” Abelas’ voice was utterly grim and ironbound. He would not permit her to stay—the word of his ruler was to be obeyed at all costs. “Forgive me, Inquisitor, but you must go now. I must
return to Fen’Harel.”

“Very well,” Boone said, reluctant. “Thank you, Abelas, for escorting me.”

He nodded. Boone cast him one last glance before approaching the mirror. He had not moved, was waiting to ensure she went through. Inhaling deeply, she entered the mirror.

And stepped into Skyhold.

She halted just on the other side of the Eluvian, rendered immobile by a flood of thoughts and the emotions inextricably intertwined with them as she looked around the large, palatial chamber that had once been hers. Nothing had changed, she realized as she took a faltering step forward. It still bore the trappings from her time as Inquisitor. The royal blue fabric of the drapery and the banners was the same, so too the intricate patterns of stained glass in the windows. She moved hesitantly, approaching the desk, noting as she ran a finger over its surface that everything upon it was as it had been when she’d left Skyhold that final time, all those years ago.

She lightly touched a stack of books on the desk corner, shifting them slightly, peering at their titles. Inquisitive Inhibitions, she read, By Varric Tethras. She smiled. It had been a gift from the dwarf, once upon a time, a campy mystery novel that featured a heroine that bore a remarkable resemblance to Boone herself. Her eyes examined the other items on the desk. There was the inkhorn she’d used daily. Next to it, in a small stand carved of bone, was her quill. There was a stack of letters piled neatly in the center of the desk; back then, she’d made it a part of her evening schedule to catch up on any correspondence that had arrived during the day. She had not read these particular letters. They were all of them unopened still.

Near the letters was a thin box made of polished wood. Boone regarded it for a long moment before picking it up. It was fastened with a simple metal catch, which she flicked open with her thumb. She lifted the lid. Inside, nestled within a bed of dark velvet, were two pens. They were crafted from wood, carved with exquisite, flawless detail to depict what she had always assumed were spirits. The nibs were long and gracefully formed. They were expensive and undoubtedly old, more works of art than mere tools and because of that, she had rarely used them. They had also been a gift from Solas, given to her during that First Day celebration so many years ago.

She was unable to keep herself from thinking again about that particular celebration, unable to keep from remembering the way she and Solas had danced, the way he’d looked at her, those certain words he’d said. She closed the lid to the box even as she closed those memories away, placing it again on the desk. She moved toward the bed, canopied and wide. The black coverlet was the very same as it had been, thick and floor length. She placed her hand upon the bed, palm down, noting that the fabric was clean. She cast her gaze around the rest of the chamber. It was clean as well. There were no spiderwebs clustered in the highest corners, no coatings of dust upon the floor or the furniture. It was as though she had never left, but keeping a room immaculate for ten years seemed a trite sort of sorcery, the type Solas would not ever deign to use.

Gathering the folds of her skirt in one hand, Boone slowly made her way down the stairs, toward the main hall. She noticed immediately that the construction of the stairwell, which had been ever ongoing during her time as Inquisitor, had finally been completed. Her pace slowed as she neared the bottom of the stairs, and she paused before the wooden door. There were voices faintly audible to her from the other side. She laid a hand upon it but withdrew it a moment later. That the keep was staffed by more of Solas’ people was obvious, but she did not want to encounter them. Not now, when far away Era’Adahlen burned and she was beset with uncertainty. Turning, she reascended the stairs.

In the middle of what had once been her room she stood and simply looked about. Being here again made her feel odd. It was not all sorrow she was experiencing. She felt displaced, riven somehow
from time. In another place, a city was alight with fire. Lives were in danger. But here she stood as
though ten years had not passed at all, as though she were still the Inquisitor and these were still her
rooms. Unsettled, she approached the window that led to the balcony but abruptly turned aside in an
attempt to avoid yet another memory dredged up from the exile she’d cast it into.

“What were you like, before the Anchor?”

Solas had asked her that one day, both of them standing on that very same balcony. She’d thought it
an odd question at the time but it made far more sense now, a decade past that moment in time. He’d
used her answer as a way to justify the continuance of keeping his secret to himself. Boone shook
her head, unwilling to relive discussions she’d once had. She walked to the desk, grasping the chair
behind it. Carefully she carried across the room to settle it before the fire. The sky without was dark,
and she knew from experience how cold the keep could become even during mild spring nights.
There was still ample firewood arranged on a wrought iron stand beside the large fireplace. Further
inspection revealed that the implements for starting a fire were still present as well, the tinder and flint
still kept in the small box she’d left them in on the mantle. It took her not long at all to coax a fire into
existence and once it was large enough to sustain itself for a while, she placed the tinder box back on
the mantle, took three steps backward, and sank into the chair.

She was awake a long while, studying the unpredictable nature of the flames and wondering about
those that damaged Era’Adahlen even now. Eventually weariness overcame her, and with her hands
folded in her lap and her head leaned back, she finally fell asleep.

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A light touch on her cheek beckoned her from her dreams. “Evelyn,” murmured a voice, his
voice, and the sound was enough to propel her fully into the waking world. She shook her head to dispel
the fog, rubbing at her eyes before lifting her head to look upon him fully. He was standing between
her chair and the fire, partially silhouetted by the glow of the flames. His expression as he regarded
her unsettled her, it being an amalgam of emotions she could not entirely identify. He was clothed as
he had been hours earlier, in dark gray and black with the full, rich pelt of a wolf over one shoulder.

She asked in a voice made husky by sleep, by dreams, “The city?”

“Damaged.”

“How badly?”

He shook his head once. “Several dwellings destroyed by fire. The market as well.”

“It is not so bad, then.”

He shook his head again. “We were fortunate in that regard.”

She cleared her throat, making way for a tentative question. “And… the dead? How many?”

He looked away from her. She watched as fury knotted his throat, watched the way the muscles in
his jaw worked as he wrestled for control. “Too many,” he told her tightly. “Far too many.
Slaughtered indiscriminately, without any thought other than that of chaos.”

“And rebellion,” she said quietly.

His narrowed eyes flicked to her before darting away again. He moved, pacing a line to the desk
with stiff, agitated strides. “Rebellion.” He spoke with his back to her, the set of his shoulders taut.
“It is no longer merely a rebellion. They intend to massacre anything they cross paths with simply to
make a point."

“And that point is?”

“Defiance.” He bowed his head, one hand curling into a fist. “They defy me. They defy the reality they find themselves in, this reality that they do not want, this reality I thrust them into. They defy their own existence.”

She asked, “What will you do now?”

Still facing away from her, his shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. When he spoke his voice had taken on a peculiar brittle tone. “Whatever I must.”

“Solas,” she said, growing inexplicably perturbed. She shifted in her seat, making to rise and checked the movement as he turned around, walking back toward the hearth, back toward her.

“I have lost ground this night,” he said, voice still sounding odd to her ears, “ground I could not afford to lose. I have lost the support of many, support I needed, support the Elvhenan needed. Some of them think me weak now, unable to subdue this beast that roams and terrorizes. In losing faith in me they will look for others to follow, others they think will reconcile the world without with the new Elvhen. They will turn their backs on everything we have built thus far, every step forward we have taken in creating unity between our people and the rest of the world.”

He had stopped in front of her chair, silhouetted once more by the wavering glow of the flames behind him. “And—I have lost lives,” he said softly. “The lives of my people — lives I have sworn to improve, to protect, to remake. Evelyn—”

He shook his head as his voice broke. Boone watched, wide-eyed, as he sank to his knees before her. He placed his hands on the arms of her chair. “All that I have built crumbles around me,” he whispered. “Piece by piece, and though I do all I can to rebuild it still falls apart so easily, so quickly, as though I had never done anything at all.”

Slowly, so slowly, his laid his head on her lap. She sat rigidly, unable to move, staring down at him in shock.

“Every terrible choice I have ever made has led me here. I see the future I had envisioned for my people in wreckage before me and I am the sole architect of its demise. Evelyn,” he whispered, his hands sliding from the arms of the chair to her sides, where they grasped at the fabric of her dress. “How has it come to this?”

Following an impulse she was helpless to resist, an impulse born of his unfamiliar, uncharacteristic defeated tone, she found herself wanting to comfort him. Independent of her autonomy her hand moved slowly, slowly, until it stroked over the smooth expanse of his head. He turned into her touch, releasing a long shuddering sigh. She stilled in her movements but didn’t withdraw. He lifted his head, looking up at her with an expression of mingled contrition and yearning.

“Solas,” she whispered, hurting for him, hurting because of him. Her real hand still cupped the back of his head. Her other hand, the hand wrought of guilt and magic, moved from where it had lain across her lap toward his face. With careful, gentle movements, she stroked the line of his cheek with the pad of her thumb. He closed his eyes at her touch, opened them again and it was then she saw a wetness that brimmed there. Fen’Harel is broken, she thought then, and found her own vision blurring in response.

“Have I doomed them all?” he asked her in a cracked whisper. His eyes were fixed upon her face,
their depths clouded with millennia of anguish she knew she could never fully fathom. “All that I have done - have I only hastened the worst outcome? Was it always inevitable?”

She had no answer for him. All she could do was shake her head mutely, helplessly, blinking hard against the persistent threat of her own tears. He closed his eyes again, bowing his head until his forehead rested against her knees. She resumed her soothing, stroking movements. In a bid to control her own emotions she tilted her head back, closing her eyes in an attempt to seal the sorrow away, swallowing hard against the rough knot in her throat. Minutes passed, the only sounds that of their breathing and the murmuring crackle of the fire. It was he that stirred finally, lifting his head once more. She let her hand fall away but he arrested the movement by wrapping his fingers around her wrist. He laid his cheek against her open palm, lifting his eyes to meet hers.

“I have wanted to know your touch,” he told her in the softest, most vulnerable of voices. “I have longed for it. Dreamed of it.”

Boone said nothing, could say nothing. Instead she watched as he shifted his head, bit by bit, until she felt the pressure of his lips against her palm. Her sharp inhale was nearly silent, but he’d heard it. She released her breath in a shaky exhale as he raised his head, as he took her hand in both of his and pressed her palm flat against his chest. Her fingers flexed in surprise; even beneath the fabric of his robe, she felt the faint throbbing of his heart.

She opened her mouth, a protest poised to fall from her lips, only to find that she couldn’t say it. And she wasn’t certain anymore, now, whether it truly would be a protest. As surely as he’d craved her touch she’d craved his, though she’d denied it, buried it, struggled to forget it. Still keeping her palm pressed flat against his chest, he lifted his other hand to her face, framing the curve of her cheek. For a mere fraction of a second she was absolutely still, and then she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

“Evelyn,” she heard him whisper. She kept her eyes closed. He was moving; she felt his body shift beneath her hand, felt him bump against her legs. She was afraid to look, and instead turned her head further, nuzzling her face into his palm, unwilling to fully accept the reality that was even now unfolding. His fingers moved down slowly to cup her chin and then, just as slowly, he tilted her face upward. “Boone,” he said, his voice feather soft, that one word a calculated, delicate gamble to prompt her to open her eyes. It worked. He stood over her, leaning down slightly, an expression on his face unlike any other she’d seen before. It frightened her and it electrified her and her hand, still held to his chest, spasmed abruptly as her blood turned to witchfire in her veins.

He kissed her just like that, her chin still cradled in his hand. He kissed her and did not relent, releasing his hold on her wrist to bring his other hand up to frame her cheek. It was the kiss that could have been all those years ago in that dream, fueled by passion too long denied, by emotions too harshly subdued. **Solas, please—!** She wanted to say, in protest or supplication she did not know. His mouth upon hers was gentle at first but assured in its movement as he coaxed hers open. It became at once a different kiss then, stronger and demanding and so overwhelming that she wondered if she’d ever be able to breathe calmly again. Just as it became too much, his lips left hers and he grazed them along her jaw, kissing softly down the curve of her neck. It was overwhelming, all-consuming, but she craved it all the same. She reached for him, one hand on his shoulder and the other knotting in the loose folds of his robe. He stepped back and pulled her with him; she rose from the chair and found herself encircled within his arms.

He tightened his embrace until she was pressed against him. Still clutching his robe she rested her head against his shoulder and wondered at the way it felt to be held like this. There was only her breathing and his, his exhalations as he bent his head fanning strands of hair away from her neck. His lips pressed a phantom kiss beneath her ear and she could not stop the small sound of want that left
her then. He responded in kind, whispering her name as his mouth trailed along the line of her jaw, back to hers, so that he could kiss her once more. She was pliant beneath his touch, her lips parting and his tongue delving and her grip upon him tightening with anticipation and need. When he finally pulled away they were both panting, and he punctuated each breath by nipping at her lower lip until she nearly moaned aloud.

“Evelyn,” he said, resting his forehead against hers. His hands cradled her face, thumbs stroking ever so gently over her skin. “I…”

The words never came. She understood regardless. She told him so through another kiss, this one so tender as to be chaste. She extricated herself from his embrace, watching his face as she did so. He seemed feverish, flushed and heady, mirroring exactly what she felt too.

“Now you know,” she told him, the words quiet even within the stillness that surrounded them.

“You need me.”

“Yes.”

“You want me.”

He took a step toward her, a smoldering heat in his eyes. She swallowed. “Yes.”

Another step and he was touching her again, ghosting the backs of his knuckles along her neck. “Do you love me?”

“Soal, you—”

“Say it.” His voice had dropped into a commanding growl, something she had never heard from him before. “Say it. Tell me.”

She obeyed, the words tremulous, nearly soundless. He intercepted her confession, covering her lips with his own, coaxing more from her as he tipped her jaw upward with his fingertips. “Vhenan,” he whispered some time later when finally he relented. “Stay.” He moved past her; she listened to his footsteps as he crossed the room. She drew closer to the fire, shivering for reasons not at all related to the temperature of the room. When he returned, she saw that he carried the heavy fur covering that had been folded at the foot of the bed. He shook it out before spreading it on the floor in front of the fire.

Kneeling, he held his hand out to her. “Come.”

Her mouth oddly dry, she complied, letting him pull her down before him. The fire’s light played across the side of his face, leaving the other side in shadow. She wet her lips, not only uncertain but also afraid. To do what she so wanted to do now would compromise every barrier she’d thrown up as defense against Solas’ argument for intimacy. But she wanted this. She wanted him, craved him and yes, she needed him too. Had needed him for a long time, as terribly skewed as that was. She could still deny herself, had denied herself so much for so long. It had worn her, isolated her, hardened her. Solas now offered her a balm to all of it, a way to temporarily erase the toll that the years of her self-imposed exile had taken upon her. He would love her at long last and at long last, she would let him. She had no illusions that there would be no regret later — remorse was as much a part of her now as her own bones. But for now, for this short while, she could force her concerns and her fears aside in order rediscover what it was to actually live without being fettered by anger and shame and remorse.

It was suddenly very hard for her to meet his eyes. She felt her cheeks flush from something other
than desire. Discerning her sudden trepidation he took her real hand in his, thumb caressing the back of her hand in soothing circles.

“... It has been a long time for me,” she offered awkwardly, blushing even more, “since I …”

He smiled, turning her hand over and placing a kiss on her palm. “For me as well.”

The feels of his lips sent an anticipatory shiver skittering down her spine. She struggled to find something to say, anything to say, and found to her mortification that she couldn’t. She looked at him mutely, her gaze beseeching from him something she couldn’t vocalize. He recognized her silent plea and the reason for it and smiled again with reassurance.

“Have you any idea how often I wanted to do this?” he asked, lifting his hand to comb his fingers through a lock of her thick hair. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation, feeling herself relax utterly as his fingers worked through her hair and against her scalp.

“Often?” she belatedly supplied.

He huffed a soft laugh. She opened her eyes. “Often,” he confirmed, and kissed her brow. She tilted her head slowly, so that his lips slid down over the bridge of her nose to land on her lips. He kissed her lightly, gently, until she nipped at his mouth. Suddenly she was pressed tight against him, her hands flat upon his chest. Even by firelight she could see that his eyes had darkened with a resurgence of desire, and she could feel evidence of his arousal even between the layers of her clothing and his. Taking a deep breath, she stood and reached around to pull at the ties of her dress. Two tugs and it was done, the ties falling loosely to her sides. With another deep breath she moved, shrugging off the garment so that it fell to pool around her feet. In only her shift she looked down at Solas, holding out her hands.

The look on his face went far beyond appreciative, so heated and so fervent that she felt another chill trickle down her spine. He took her offered hands, still on his knees, and pulled her closer until he could wrap his arms around her waist. He rested his head against her stomach; she felt his breath flutter the thin layer of her shift. Her hand cupped the back of his head and slid away only when he looked up at her with such craving that her breath caught in her throat. He released his hold on her. Eyes fixed upon him, scarcely breathing, she shrugged out of her shift and let it fall too.

His hands were upon her instantly, fingers splaying out over her sides before slowly sliding upward. A scar — one of many — caught his attention, a white line flaring straight across her ribs. It was the remnant of the wound she’d received in the Western Approach all those years ago, the wound that had almost killed her. He remembered; his fingertips skimmed across it, barely touching, as he murmured, “You nearly died that day.”

“You kept me alive.”

“I came very close to failing.” He lowered his head, tracing the scar’s length with his mouth and she struggled to control her suddenly erratic breathing. When he’d finished he took her hand in his, eyes roaming up the length of her exposed body until meeting hers, direct, ardent, and inescapable. He tugged, pulling her down to the floor before him and she obeyed, settling on her knees.

“You are—” he started, but then shook his head. She crooked a brow, curious as to what he meant to say. “I lack the words,” he said instead, sliding a hand behind her neck and pulling her closer for a kiss.

“As do I.” The fingers of her artificial hand found the pelt of the wolf that rode on his shoulder, sliding through it, luxuriating in the softness. He heeded her unspoken hint, releasing her long
enough to undo the strap that attached the fur to his belt before shoving it to the floor. She leaned back slightly, observing with skittish, eager expectancy as he undid his belt. She reached for him as he slid out of his robe, running her hands over the revealed expanse of his chest, bending her head to lay a kiss in the hollow where his shoulder met his neck. His arms encircled her tightly once more and encouraged by his reaction, she let her teeth graze over his skin in a gentle, teasing bite.

She was on her back immediately and he followed, bracing himself on his arms. Her eyes roamed over him, noting that he was not without his own scars. She let her thumb follow the hooked outline of one, noting the way the muscles in his stomach tightened as she did so. Her eyes flitted upwards to his and she held them as her hand flattened against his skin, moving downward in a slow and thorough exploration. She stopped when she brushed the edge of his only remaining piece of clothing, watching as his eyes clouded with the promise of everything she’d wanted, everything she’d been so afraid to want.

“Solas.” she implored him almost soundlessly.

Boone reached for him with one hand, fully devoted to divesting him of the last of his clothes. He read her intent and waylaid her with a shake of his head. Instead he began his assault in earnest, sliding down her body until his mouth was suddenly on one breast. She moved beneath him, startled and overtaken by an immediate tidal wash of arousal. His lips closed over one nipple, eliciting Boone to utter something very akin to a moan and then he moved on, tongue laving a path ever downward, across the expanse of her abdomen and then lower still. He nudged her legs apart, looking up at her as he did so, before abruptly dropping his head. And then she was rendered incapable of coherent thought as his fingers parted her slick folds, as his tongue worked its sinuous magic. She was overcome, clutching at the fur she lay on, unable to keep her hips from writhing as she endured his ministrations. He kept her pinioned with his arms around her thighs, relenting only when he heard his own name escape from her in a repeated breathy whisper.

He rose to his feet, swiftly shedding what remained of his clothes before dropping to his knees again. The shape of his erection was instantly evident and her hand moved; his groan as her fingers wrapped around the rigid length of him was a primal plea spilling forth from his very core. He shuddered as she stroked him once, twice — his head fell back and his eyes closed as she continued to stroke him, intent on commanding from him the same kind of pleasure he’d demanded from her. Abruptly he gripped her wrist, his breathing hard and fast, and she reluctantly loosed her hold. Spreading her legs with his thighs he fell forward, bracing himself on his hands above her. His mouth crashed down upon hers and it was only herself she could taste, a heady, tantalizing thing that had her raking her fingers down his back. His tongue was relentless, invading her mouth, sliding against her own and compelling from her everything she had, everything she could possibly give.

“Solas,” she panted when finally they broke apart. She would have begged him in that moment— was ready to beg him—but he was moving, shifting, preparing. Her legs parted further in invitation, her hips lifting, and then he was there, sliding into her slowly, so slowly, bit by tantalizing bit. There was some pain—as she’d said, it had been a long time—but it was a pain quickly eased by the building pleasure, a slowly cresting wave that carried her in its swell. He was receptive to that fact, pausing often, watching her face carefully for any indicator he should stop. She grabbed his head and pulled it down, encouraging him with the softness of her lips, enticing him as she tightened herself around the hard, unyielding length of him. A rolling growl spilled from his lips and he rested his
forehead against hers, penetrating further as she wrapped her legs around him.

One last final thrust and he was fully sheathed. The only sound then was their mingled breathing, fast and uneven, his mouth trailing unevenly over the lines of her jaw and neck. She shifted impatiently, in need of satiation, her hips undulating in a calculated bid to make him lose control. She succeeded somewhat; he began to move, pulling back slightly only to thrust home hard, setting a slow, deliberate rhythm. He never withdrew fully, intent on remaining as deep inside her as he could and it was exactly what she had craved: a welcome invasion, a claim to her body she had too long denied. She hooked a leg over his, surging upward to meet him mid-thrust. Another growl escaped from him, punctuated quickly by small, nipping bites on her neck, catching her skin between his teeth and gently sucking. His hand found hers and clasped it, and as he rolled his hips against hers he pulled her arm up and over her head. His other hand grazed up her side until it found her breast and remained there, his fingers dancing over her flesh in a manner designed to scatter any remaining semblance of solid thought.

He shifted position suddenly, grasping her by the hips and pulling her up sharply. It was too much, and she was thrown over the edge into a freefall of euphoria unlike any other. He followed her over that edge, exhaling her name on a long and breathless moan. She kissed him as he surged into her one last time, as he emptied himself within her, capturing his cry and tasting the bliss that came with it.

Time lapsed. She drifted in suspended gratification, mired firmly and willingly in the remnants of pleasure greater than any other she’d ever known. Her hands traced lazy, aimless circles on his back while his fingers sketched an indistinct pattern on the skin of her arm. Finally, when their breathing had evened, he pushed himself up and rolled to the side, taking her with him as he did so. She pillowed her head on the crook of his arm and found that for the first time in a very, very long time, she could meet his eyes and marvel at the openness she saw there. The fire still burned, warm at her back, the intermittent light it gave off casting wan, flickering shadows over them both. There were words she wanted to say, too many to sort out into something decipherable. She settled for laying her artificial hand on his chest, splaying her fingers in an effort to detect his heartbeat.

“Ar lath ma, vhenan.” The words bore the husky overtones of contentment.

“And I you,” she whispered in return, wondering at how much had changed between them that she could shamelessly give him that truth.

But for the fire, all was silent then. She withdrew her hand, let him take it in his. She studied him, utterly at ease, noting that the ever-present lines of strain had faded somewhat from his countenance. She knew he was seeing the same in her, viewing a woman who had let go of the many defenses she had spent ten years building around herself. The person who lie beneath was entirely vulnerable. She would not emerge unscathed from what had just transpired—things were far too fragile and convoluted between them both for that to be possible. She’d made a choice to surrender to desires she no longer had the will to defy, desires that went far beyond pure physical lust. She had needed to be held, needed to be touched, needed this tenderness to remind her that not everything in the world was tangled up in threads of deceit and mistrust and strife. She had needed the validation of seeing the light of worship in Solas’ eyes as he’d moved above her and inside of her. It had led her to feel whole, unmarred and untarnished, something she had not felt since before she’d been forced to assume the role of Inquisitor.

She broke the silence eventually, unwilling to let the world without intrude but needing to answers to certain questions. “Will you return to the city?”

“At dawn.”
“You're not needed now?”

His fingers around hers squeezed gently as he shook his head. “Not yet. Soon. All Mien'Harel found within the city were dealt with. Abelas’ forces pursued those that slipped from the city. He was to show them no mercy.”

“How were they able to infiltrate the city?”

Faint indicators of frustration appeared on his face again as creases at the corner of his eyes and mouth. Boone immediately regretted asking the question, saying as much.

“No,” he said, “You are right to ask. It's something you should know. Their infiltration was the result of my own oversight. I had assumed I had the full dedication of all Keepers and clans the Elvhenan is currently allied with. I was wrong.” He shifted, rolling onto his back. Boone propped herself up on one elbow to look upon him as he continued to speak. “I was not without my suspicions. I made efforts to ensure those I did not fully trust were watched carefully. Still… I was foolish. The influence of the Evanuris haunts me even now.”

His eyes had narrowed, fixed upon the ceiling. “Their agents have been trickling into the city over the last few months. Men and women disguised as merchants, as farmers, as members of visiting elvhen clans. That they had help from within the city, from within my own council, is now certain. I am betrayed.”

“Who?” she asked quietly

He sighed. It was a weary, worn sound and it pained her a little to hear it. “I don't know. Not yet. The city is sealed now. No one may leave. Not even the visiting nobles of Ferelden, which will undoubtedly damage the relations I have worked so hard to build.”

“What if they are still able to escape, those that—”

“The city is sealed.” he repeated, “by more than just an increased military presence. I have called upon a magic I have never had cause to use before now, magic I had hoped never to use. There is no way of getting in or out save the eluvians, and they are all protected by unassailable measures I put into place long ago.”

After a long hesitation, she offered with genuine feeling, “I am sorry, Solas.”

“You needn’t be. You are blameless.” He moved, rolling onto his side once again, his arm going about her. “Once dawn arrives I must go. You are free to remain here or return to the city. I'm afraid the next few days within Era'Adahlen will be hectic, the demands for my attention numerous.”

“I understand.”

He studied her face intently, fingers stroking lightly over her cheek. “Once all is dealt with …” He trailed off, looking in that moment uncharacteristically lost.

“Yes?”

“It is a question for another time,” he said finally, and she understood what it was he meant to say. He was right; such a thing must wait. There was too much now that he must deal with. But she could not help but feel some sorrow as he kissed her, because she was uncertain of what answer she could give him when finally the time came. Theirs was a story with an unwritten end and even now, even after this, there was no way of predicting what conclusion awaited them both.
Silence fell once more. Sleep lingered on the fringes for them both, and it was the sensation of him slowly stroking her hair that finally lulled her into its grasp.

.x.
When echoes gain substance

Chapter Notes

My gratitude once again goes to Silenceatemycat for her input.

.x.

Boone woke just as the sky began to turn, dawn’s encroach silhouetting the mountain peaks that cradled Skyhold. She watched through the windows as the rising sun’s light spilled between the crags, watched until it became too bright for to behold before turning her head. At her side, Solas still slept. He lay facing her, his breathing slow and deep. There was a peaceful stillness to him in his repose, but even as she watched his brow furrowed faintly, perhaps due to unrest in his dreams. They had fallen asleep entwined, but sometime during the hours past they had separated. She sat up slowly, carefully, feeling suddenly self-conscious, an absurdity considering everything that had just transpired. To her left the fire still burned, the flames as large as they had been the night before when she’d first coaxed it into being. Solas’ magic had sustained it all night, ensuring they had slept in comfortable warmth.

She sat motionless for a long time, lost in thought. As she had known it would, reality had intruded and would not be denied. She was still Boone and he still Fen’Harel and there still existed between them a history littered with obstacles that she had once believed were insurmountable. Her perspective had changed, of course—she had admitted to loving him and that admittance had been more than merely voicing the words aloud. She had relinquished the control and the conviction that had sustained her this far. Stripped now entirely bare in more sense than one, Boone knew it was only a matter of time before some weapon, be it word or deed, wounded her to the quick. Once she had believed it would be Solas that would wound her thus; now she wondered with more than a little dread if that inevitable wound would be self-inflicted. There was a dissonance now in what she felt, too, something she had not entirely expected. Her guilt and her shame were far too ingrained within her to shed entirely, but their burden was now mitigated by what might actually be restfulness and ease. Whether it was an aftereffect of what she had experienced with Solas or something more permanent, she had no way of knowing.

At her side, she heard his breathing alter as he transitioned into wakefulness. She turned her head to look upon him, watched as his eyes blinked slowly once, twice, before focusing on her. They regarded each other in silence until he smiled, not without uncertainty, as though he expected she may react poorly. She could hardly blame him, given the events of the recent past.

She shifted a little, reaching for him, stroking her hand over his head. His smile solidified, becoming one of such contentment that it warmed her through and through. He said, voice husky from the clinging remnants of sleep, “I have wished for a moment like this for almost as long as I have known you.”

“You have it now,” she told him.

“Yes.” He lifted his arms, catching her by the shoulders and pulling her down to him. His lips against hers were gentle, soft, but the kiss gradually altered, becoming more insistent. It was he that broke it, apologizing on rasping breath. “There’s no time, as much as I wish there was. I must return to the
city.”

Despite his words, he didn’t release her, instead tugging her down so that she lay alongside him. His gaze upon hers was searching, his expression sobering. “What we’ve done—I would have you remember the reasons why instead of the doubts that I know have burdened you for years, that I know you are already again thinking of.”

Equally as solemn, she said, “Denying the truth does us no favors.”

“Truths are sometimes numerous.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, sighing. “It’s a truth that we are bound together by what we feel for each other, Solas. But we are also bound by more than that.”

“I’m not asking you to forget—”

“I think you are,” she interrupted softly. “I think you would have me erase all recollection of what once was in order to focus on what is.”

He shook his head. “What once was is what led us here.”

Her smile was tinged with a little sadness. She ran the fingers of her artificial hand over his lips, gently caressing. “You worry that I regret what we’ve done. I don’t. I wanted it. I wanted you. I still do.”

“And what happens once you cross through the eluvian, back into the city? Do you again become Boone? Will you separate yourself from me once more, living as a ghost might?”

“I am always Boone,” she reminded him. “Solas—things are changed now and there is no way back to what was. You think I’ll deny away all of this and granted, I cannot fault you for that. It’s difficult…” here she paused, working hard to assemble all she thought into a shortened, coherent explanation. “I’m afraid. Of what you expect, of what I expect too, though at the moment I have no idea just what exactly I should expect. What I fear most is what will happen should it ever be known that we’ve become lovers. I lived once before in constant unease for fear of upsetting the balance of public opinion. I will not do so again.”

His voice had grown silent, nearly soundless. “Nobody ever need know, if you so wish.”

“What of the matter of your consort?”

He shook his head again. “I told you, that was the aspiration of a fool.”

“And yet—”

“I don’t want you as consort.” With his hands on her shoulders, he rolled her onto her back, holding himself over her. His gaze was inescapable as it scanned her face, pinioning her with its mixture of profound yearning and a hint of covetousness that, despite herself, she desired to see. “I want you as you are, as Boone, as Evelyn, as anything else you may ever become. I want you as mine.”

“You have me.”

“But for how long?” He dropped his head, his mouth a hair’s breadth from hers. His next words flowed warmly over her skin. “How long will you allow yourself this?”

It was a good question, the very same question she’d been asking herself since awaking. She gave
him back the only answer she could. “I don’t know.”

He kissed her hard, as though in an effort to change that answer. He kissed her with such passion that her heart thundered in her chest, her hands clutching at his upper arms. A long while later he broke the kiss, panting, sliding down to rest his head upon her chest.

Her real hand came up to cup the back of his head. “Let us enjoy what we have while we have it, Solas.”

“I would greatly prefer if it never ended.” His voice was muffled as his mouth found the tender flesh of her breast, as it moved across the swell. She felt the shocking swirl of his tongue around her nipple and said, the worlds strangled by reluctance and lust, “It’s past dawn.”

He halted his actions, looking up at her. “You choose a terrible time to be cruel, Lady Trevelyan.”

She could not help but smirk. He pushed himself away from her, getting to his feet. She followed, bending to retrieve her clothes before donning them quickly. She watched as he donned his own clothing, unabashedly admiring the sight of his body illuminated as it was in the bright light of morning. He paused in buckling his belt, catching her heated gaze and giving back one his own. To refrain from going to him as she so desperately wanted to do, she turned and walked to the desk.

“Will you come with me?” He asked from behind her.

She nodded. He finished dressing and approached; his touch at her elbow prompted her to move with him, toward the eluvian anchored to the wall behind the desk.

“Are you certain you wish to return?” He paused before the mirror, turning to face her. “You can remain. All those here know of you. You may do as you wish.”

“This place…” she looked around the room, her room, for a long string of moments before finally shaking her head. “I dislike how I feel here, out of time and out of place. And besides,” she said, returning her attention to him, “the former Inquisitor should be present when it comes time to meet with the visiting Fereldens.”

“I would not ask that of you. They will be irate given the current state of things.”

Boone nearly snorted. “Irate? That’s something of an understatement.”

“They will be furious,” Solas amended wryly.

“And they will want the weight of whatever I might have to say.” Boone stepped toward the mirror, reaching out with one finger to touch the surface. It rippled at her touch, the colors within a mesmerizing swirl of deep blues and dark purples. “Let me help you in this, if I’m able.”

“Thank you.” The words were entirely genuine, his fingers on her shoulder gently squeezing in gratification.

She stepped through the eluvian and he followed at her heels. On the other side, within the darkened confines of the small room, all was silent. He led their way into his study, where she paused to look at the other eluvian, thinking of what lay on the other side. Solas took note of her hesitation and halted at the door.

“I will need to see them soon,” she said, and there was no mistaking the undertone of reluctant dread in her voice.
Understanding was written into his expression. “What will you tell them?”

Boone’s smile was not a happy one. “It won’t matter what I tell them. They’re both perceptive. They’ll be able to guess without my so much as saying a word. And Thom…”

_Thom._ He would know the moment he laid eyes upon her that something monumental had changed. She could lie to him of course, but he knew her so well as to instantly discern any falsehood. She could try to pretend that everything was the same, but he would know that something was awry. It wouldn’t take him long to guess what. And it would gut him to know the truth, wound him so greatly that she was truly terrified what might happen between them both. She didn’t fear his rage. She feared the inevitable look of betrayed anguish she’d see on his face the moment he perceived the truth. Her vision blurred.

“Thus I repay my oldest, dearest friend for all he’s done for me,” she said, the words cracking. She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. Solas started toward her; she held up her hand, shaking her head. “I’ll be—it’s fine. I won’t go through just yet. I need time to…”

_Time to think of a plausible lie, time to pretend that maybe what I’ve done won’t break Thom beyond any and all hope of recovery._ She couldn’t voice those thoughts aloud, instead looked at Solas wordlessly, imploring him with her eyes to comprehend just what it was she needed.

He did. “I won’t be meeting with the Fereldens until later in the evening. There is a great deal else I must attend do. You’ve time to do whatever you must.”

“Thank you.”

They regarded each other from several feet apart. Boone longed for a simple comfort, the kind that could be granted simply by his arms going around her. She was certain he wished to do so as well, but finally, reluctantly, he took a step back toward the door. “I’m sorry, vhenan, but I must go.” He hesitated as though he wanted to say more, but there was no point. They both of them knew that what Boone would face on the other side of the mirror was inevitable and inescapable. There were no words to soothe what hurt was soon to come.

She waved him off, and when he’d disappeared through the doors she lifted her head to stare at the eluvian. The dread she felt knotted in her throat; every breath she took struggled to pass it. Movda, she knew, would understand. She couldn’t approve and she’d be concerned for Boone’s emotional and mental welfare, but she _would_ understand. But Thom, Thom who loved her and had loved her without question or doubt for all these long years — he wouldn’t understand. He couldn’t. There was for him no way to fathom how she could give herself to the man that had been the catalyst for it all the terrible things that had befallen her — and how could she fault him for that, when it was something she herself was still attempting to reconcile?

Finally, she began to move. Not toward the mirror, though; instead she followed Solas out the door, into the halls of the keep. She needed a little more time to think, to formulate her explanations, to prepare for the battle to come. And it would be a battle, could never be anything but, to stand before Thom and Movda and endure their realizations of just what had changed for her. Her footsteps took her out of the keep, across the bridge. She paused roughly halfway across to look out upon the city. The evidence of the fire was readily evident even from here, blackened buildings, grass, and trees marring the cultivated aesthetic of the rest of the city. There was a great deal of activity in that area, a great many people working together to clear the wreckage and salvage what could be salvaged. Boone observed for a moment longer before continuing on until she’d reached her quarters.

She took the time to bathe, stripping off her clothing and leaving it on the bed before padding into the alcove that housed the cistern and stone tub. As she wet her skin she was unable to keep from
remembering the way Solas had touched her mere hours before. The enormity of what had transpired was not another demon she could wrestle into submission. It was a very real beast, one that ruled the forefront of her thoughts with teeth bared, daring her to try to banish it. Boone paused in her ablutions, leaning her head against the wall, dripping tendrils of hair plastered to her neck and shoulders. Solas had torn down the Veil, unleashed the denizens banished behind it into the waking world. He’d warred against the Evanuris and after that bloody victory, had turned his attention to wresting the ancient Elvhen lands back from humans, at great cost. In every story Boone had written, every tale she’d recorded, nearly every source of strife and misfortune could be traced back through time and circumstance to reveal Solas as the villain. It was irrefutable.

And she loved him.

When she had finished she dressed in something that made her feel far more comfortable than the many dresses that had become her staple since living here. She donned the clothes she’d been wearing when she first arrived in Era’Adahlen, the faded shirt and pants in better shape than they had been due to some attention from Irithala. Her old riding boots fit as comfortably as they ever did, her lined, patched cloak a familiar weight over her shoulders. She tied back the damp mass of her hair in a loose tail, pulled up her hood, and departed from her rooms.

Minutes later she stood once more in front of the eluvian in Solas’ study. Its surface was dark and opaque but it woke as she neared, showing her ribbons of color in perpetual whirling movement. She stood motionless before it, feeling the way her heart beat swiftly, driven by the awful fear she felt now. On the other side of the mirror were her two closest friends, and she’d betrayed them — or at least it felt very much like betrayal. Steeling herself, Boone took one deep breath and then another before crossing over.

Her world ended on the other side.

Time splintered. She was not aware of moving and yet somehow she was standing in the middle of Movda’s small kitchen, staring down uncomprehendingly at the large spot of dried blood on the floor, turning to look at the knocked over table and the broken chairs. From there she found herself suddenly at the threshold to the small home, looking out over a yard strewn with bodies. There was a goat lying on its side near the pens, its fur splotched with darkened blood. And there, a trio of dead chickens, all of them headless. There were other bodies as well, humanoid, but Boone didn’t focus on them because they shouldn’t be there, couldn’t be there—

Time escaped her again, trying with strange, unfathomable mercy to spare her from what must come. And then she found herself on her knees before the stables, keening in her throat as her outstretched hands reached for Movda, lying so still and silent before her, her throat a gaping red ruin. Time tried to shield her again; her vision darkened and flickered but not fast enough, not nearly fast enough because it was then she realized Thom was lying only a couple feet away, Thom on his back, Thom bloodied from wounds, from so many wounds —

The sound that left her wasn’t human. It was a low and desolate, a wail of such profound anguish that it seemed to rend the air. When she couldn’t continue, when she’d run out of breath, she doubled over with her face in her hands. This was not reality. It couldn’t be. Fate wouldn’t be that cruel, not now, not after everything else. She told herself this, kept telling herself this even as she lifted her head again to gaze with wide eyes upon the nightmarish tableau before her. They’d run, she realized, minutes or hours she couldn’t possibly know. They’d been attacked in the house and they’d run. Thom had fought their way free of the house, had defended Movda as fiercely and furiously as he was able. He had used every skill he’d learned over the course of his life, had
dredged up the rough, rugged courage that was his and his alone to make the last desperate stand of his life. He’d urged Movda to break for the stables, to where her horse and his were penned. And they had both of them made it that far, had almost made it to freedom when they’d been finally been overrun. It hadn’t been a quick end. Thom had made sure of that. He’d fought with the last vestiges of strength he’d had, a final feral ferocity in face of absolute hopelessness. But he’d fallen, and when he fell, Movda had fallen too.

There was no question of who the enemy was. Boone, face streaked with tears, turned her head to look upon the rest of the yard with eyes that were too wide and too blank. The other bodies, the bodies she’d been too scared to notice before—they were Elvhen. Those that bore the armor of the Elvhenan were Solas’ men. The others, clad in nondescript armor, the pointed tips of their ears evident even through hair and clotted blood, they could only be members of the Mien’Harel.

Boone couldn’t breathe. Didn’t want to. Slowly let her eyes drag across the ground until they found Movda again and she wished aloud on a rasping whisper that death would take her too. She reached for Movda, her hand shaking violently as her fingers caressed the old woman’s cheek. Open your eyes! she screamed without sound. Open your eyes, Movda, and look at me!

There was no answer, no response, and Boone crawled desperately around Movda’s body, crawled to Thom and it was there she collapsed, her head on the cold, unyielding metal of his breastplate. She held her breath, hoping to feel his chest rise and fall with even the faintest of breaths but there was none. There was nothing. Thom was dead, Movda was dead and she was still alive, still alive when she absolutely did not deserve to be. She pushed herself up and framed his cold face in her hands, tried to see a spark of light in his opened eyes but there was only a yawning oblivion in their dark depths, an oblivion she would have readily flung herself into to follow him, if only she could.

My Thom, she thought, her tears spattering onto his cheeks. His name escaped her mouth over and over again, until she was gasping, until her throat was raw. Still she held him, unwilling to let go, as around her the world continued on as though what had happened here mattered not at all. Time fractured once again and it was a kindness; awareness drifted from her for a long time. When it returned the day was nearing its end and she sat between the corpses of her friends, her fingers clutching their unresponsive hands.

The time had come to think again. There was no avoiding it. And so she did, her thoughts leading her to conclusions that would have been alarming, once upon a time. The bodies scattered throughout the yard had been dead for at least several hours when she’d found them, maybe more, which meant that the attack had come the night before. The fire, Boone thought hollowly. The fire hadn’t been the main attack of the Mien’Harel. It had been the diversion. It was easily enough done, she imagined, and probably not without help from a traitor. Perhaps a false messenger had arrived here with dire news to distract the guards. The attack had been swift, merciless, and the guards of the Elvhenan had been dispatched without much trouble. Thom had been another matter, of this she was certain. He would not have gone gently. Of the numerous Mien’Harel corpses strewn throughout the yard, Boone knew that Thom had accounted for the majority. The death here at the farm and the chaos back at the city would ensure that whatever method Solas had of staying informed as to Thom and Movda’s status would be interrupted. For a time, nobody would know what had happened here.

All that was left to unravel was the reasoning behind all of this, but even that was obvious to her now, infused as she was with the numb clarity wrought from emotional devastation. The Mien’Harel had wanted Boone since the beginning, but Solas had taken considerable measures to ensure her safety. But there was a certainty to her life within the Elvhen city—her visits here, to the coast to visit her family. It was all of it a trap, constructed with ruthless and reckless intent. It was a trap and it had worked, for she was here now. They were not far off, she knew. She could have gotten to her feet and walked unsteadily back to the house to fall through the eluvian. She lacked the desire to do so. In
killing Thom and Movda, the Mien’Harel had effectively withered Boone’s will to survive.

And so she sat unmoving exactly as she was. The light of the late afternoon sun became obscured as it usually did on the coast by heavy, dark clouds that promised rain. The air smelled of imminent moisture and the wind picked up. Boone remained still. When sounds of activity from beyond the compound became audible, it was only her eyes that moved, keeping pace with the sounds from without to watch as riders began to pass through the gate. They were all of them elves, she noted with detached calm. Heavily armored elves, in mail and plate and banded leather, bearing swords and daggers and bows. She had not gone unnoticed, still though she was, and she watched unfeeling as one man spoke to all the others, dismounted, and approached.

He was tall and broad for an elvhen, clad in dark, riveted leather gear. The hilt of a sword was visible over one shoulder; another blade rode at his hip. He stopped a few feet from where Boone sat between the bodies of Movda and Thom, studying her in silence. She studied him in turn. His face was striking, cheekbones high and brows curving boldly over pale blue eyes. He wore his black hair long and it fell over one shoulder in a loose plait. When he began to move again, it was to walk until he was between the bodies as she was, stopping directly in front of her. He dropped into a crouch.

“I am Geldauran.” he said. His voice was authoritative and concise. “Do you know of me?”

She tried her voice but it was nowhere to be found. She shook her head.

He made a chiding noise. “Is this Fen’Harel’s doing, I wonder, or your own ignorance? Irrelevant now either way.” He shifted, settling into a sitting position. His eyes lowered, taking in the way her fingers clasped the hands of the dead. They returned to her face and it struck her then how truly pale they were, nearly glacial in hue. “Elvhen lore names me one of the Forgotten Ones, though I’ve taken great pains recently to ensure that I am never forgotten.”

_The Forgotten Ones._ Boone closed her eyes.

“Yes.” he affirmed. “Of the Evanuris, I am the last. Another omission on behalf of Fen’Harel, another truth he did not deign to share with you—or anyone, as I’m given to believe. Far better for the rest of the world to believe that he had slain us all than to admit he’d let one slip through his grasp.”

Boone no longer had the capacity to feel betrayed by this information. In fact she wondered if she would ever feel anything again. It would be a far kinder thing if, from now on, emotion was beyond her. She hoped it would be so. She opened her eyes and kept them fixed on his face, waiting for what else he would say.

“I’ve waited a long time to finally meet you, Lady Trevelyan.” One side of his mouth had curved upwards into a half-smile, one that lacked any sort of warmth. “There is much for us to discuss, you and I.”

_There is nothing._ Boone thought. _I am nothing._

Geldauran leaned forward. He caught her chin in one hand, turning it slowly to one side and then the other. She kept her gaze lowered, enduring his scrutiny in silence. “Not unimpressive,” he said finally, releasing her. “But not quite the face I had expected, to have influenced the Dread Wolf so.”

Behind him, his people sat astride their horses quietly, observing from afar the interaction between their leader and Boone. She wondered how many of them Thom had slain. In reaction to that fleeting thought, her flesh and blood fingers tightened around Thom’s hand. That small movement did not go unnoticed.

She dragged a question out of the depths of herself, remembering that she had a voice. It was a haggard sound. “Why?”

“Why not?” he returned. “These two were nothing in the grander scheme.” He prodded Movda’s corpse with one finger, watching Boone carefully as he did so. “They were simply blameless individuals who had the great misfortune of knowing you. There is no reason for their deaths other than that. Yes,” he said as slow, heavy tears escaped from Boone’s eyes, as she caught her breath on a ragged sob. “They died because of you. Will you tell me now how unfair it is that I’ve slain them both? That they were innocent and undeserving of this fate? Tell me. Blame me. I welcome your wrath.”

“And if I cannot have your anger,” he said, leaning forward again, touching the tip of his finger to her cheek in order to catch a tear that had fallen, “I’ll take your sorrow. It will prove as satisfying. Perhaps even more so.”

Boone bowed her head, unable to stem the tears, while before her Geldauran waited. When long minutes later her emotional struggle finally eased she looked at him again.

“You’ll kill me.” It was less a statement than a question, and there was a plea woven into those three words, a request for a harsh and inconceivable kindness from the last god-king of the ancient Elvhen.

“No. You’ll wish for it soon, as I’m certain you already do. But death is a boon I cannot grant you, Evelyn.”

She did not miss the faint emphasis on one specific word, nor how he’d tied it together with her true name. “What will you do?” she asked, though in truth whatever fate he intended for her no longer really mattered. All that had mattered was already gone.

“That is a question to which there is more than one answer, and you will come to learn them all.” He smiled, and on any other person it would have been a kind, amiable smile. He shifted suddenly, rising to his feet. He held a hand out to her. “Come.”

“Bury them,” Boone said, unmoving. “Burn them. Don’t leave them here like this.”

“It makes no difference to them how they are left. Come.”

Boone shook her head. *This* was her place—here, with Thom and Movda, on the farm that had been her home for so long. She needed to be here. To leave them now was an unthinkable irreverence...

Geldauran took a half-step forward and dropped to one knee. He was very close, his face filling the entirety of her vision. With one hand he reached for her, his fingers sliding around her neck and tightening slowly, one finger at a time. There was a burning intensity in his pale eyes that commanded her attention. She could not have looked away even had she wanted to. “There is no freedom for you now, Evelyn. From all I’ve learned of you it seems reasonable to assume you’re intelligent, so I’m confident you’ve surmised what awaits you from here on.”

“You’ll hurt me,” Boone whispered, feeling the pressure of his fingers as she spoke, “to hurt Solas.”

He nodded, one side of his mouth twisting slightly. “Something I learned long ago is that there are different kinds of hurt. I’ve had an ample amount of time, exiled as I’ve been, to discover and explore those differences.” His fingers loosened momentarily only to restrict again, gently squeezing. “Fen’Harel has had countless lifetimes to live and to meddle and interfere as he is so adept at doing.
No longer. His reckoning has come. You will aid me in that.”

His hand fell away and he rose to his feet. He held out his hand once again. “You won’t like the alternative,” he warned as she remained motionless.

“What have I left to lose?” She gestured around her. Her entire world had already been sundered and undone, and that which she loved most now lay dead on either side of her.

“There is always something,” Geldauran said, and there was a chilling certainty in the way he said it. “Now stand and accompany me, Lady Trevelyan. Show my people you are the Inquisitor of legend and not the wearied, weakened husk you seem now. You would do yourself a kindness to cooperate.”

She stood slowly. He seized her by the upper arm, pulling her with him as he walked. She twisted her head around to look back upon Thom and Movda, stumbling as she did so. “I cannot leave them,” she whispered, and flung herself to the side in an effort to break his hold. His grip was unrelenting iron, and he let her tire herself out before pulling her easily toward him. His hold tightened to the point of pain. She winced, biting back a gasp.

“There’s something you must understand if it was not already made clear. I will give you two choices,” he said, his other hand fastening around her arm, “and they will never again be given to you past this point. It's entirely up to you from now on how things will proceed: simply or painfully.”

“You’ll hurt me either way.”

Geldauran’s smile was cold. “Yes. That is assured in the future. For now, you can either walk with me or I'll drag you. Choose.”

He read her submission in the way her shoulders slumped. He began to walk again, tugging her with him. She stumbled. His firm hold kept her upright. “Quickly, Evelyn.” he chastised. “We must not be here when Fen’Harel comes in search of you.”

He led her across the yard. His people observed their approach in silence. “The horse,” Geldauran directed as they drew near. A man who had remained near the compound’s gate led a large, saddled horse toward them. Not just any horse, Boone realized as they came to a halt, but Hob, the gelding Solas had given Movda all those months ago.

“As you see, we have not taken everything from you.” Geldauran took Hob’s reins from the elvhen man. “No sense in slaughtering a perfectly useful animal. Cover her eyes,” he ordered, and Boone was startled when hands seized her shoulders from behind. She didn’t fight as she was blindfolded with thick, dark cloth, nor when she was roughly shoved forward.

“Reach for the saddle. It’s there, right there. Good. Here’s the stirrup. Pull yourself up.” Boone mutely obeyed his orders, moving awkwardly as she fumbled for what she could not see. Once mounted, she heard Geldauran issue commands in Elvhen and then came the sounds of horses moving, of tack jingling, of men talking.

A hand was suddenly on her knee. “You must do your best to remain seated, Lady Trevelyan, for we now travel fast and far. It wouldn’t do to have to lash you to your horse this early.”

She gave no indication she heard him other than to curl her fingers around the edge of the saddle pommel. His touch withdrew. A short time later Hob began to move, his reins in possession of another rider or perhaps even Geldauran. Blind and broken Boone was taken from her once-home, captive now of the last of the Evanuris.
x.
Hard answers, harsh truths

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rain began as they left the farm. It was a cold, unrelenting deluge, quickly seeping through her clothing and soaking her hair. With her eyes covered her world consisted only of movement and sensation, the rocking of Hob’s swift trot and the chill of her sodden clothes. Hours later pain became a factor, as muscles that were no longer accustomed to days of riding protested the now unfamiliar exercise. Geldauran’s company spoke little among themselves and what words they did exchange were in Elvhen. And so Boone was left to her thoughts, to her misery and grief, in a world without color or substance. The day lengthened. What light that had filtered in through her blindfold began to darken. The rain continued still. Eventually, despite her discomfort, despite her turmoil, weariness consumed her and she dozed, slipping in and out of awareness as hours passed. She came fully awake when Hob came to a halt, her head snapping up as she strained to hear everything she could not see.

Moments later, Geldauran’s voice originated from beside her. “We’ve arrived, Lady Trevelyan. I’ll help you to dismount.”

She felt his hand on her elbow, prompting her. She slowly swung her leg over, wincing as her stiffened body protested the movement, and dropped to the ground. Her blindfold was removed and as it fell away she looked around, blinking. All around her people were moving, setting up camp. Dusk had fallen and the rain had slowed to a faint drizzle. Looking around, Boone realized she couldn’t discern much of her surroundings aside from the dark line of forest to her left. Someone led Hob away and she was left standing next to the last remaining Evanuris. She could see little of his face in the dark, but felt his hand on her elbow as he spoke. “Come.”

She obeyed. The first four steps she took were stilted, painful, and his grip on her arm tightened to keep her from tottering over. They passed men erecting a shelter, a large lean-to that would keep the rain off their heads but would do nothing about the ground slick with mud beneath. As they walked it became apparent that somewhere along the way, even more elvhen had joined their number. There were far more horses than she recalled seeing originally, as well as two large wagons, one covered and one not. She wondered if this was the entirety of the Mien’Harel, all that had survived after being hunted for months by the combined forces of the Elvhenan, Orlais, and Ferelden.

An elvhen woman called out a question to her leader. Geldauran came to a halt. He conversed with the woman at length, gesturing. Boone listened intently but was unable to pick out any words other than the most common she’d heard during her time in Era’Adahlen. Geldauran spoke the language as fluently as any elf, but there was an intriguing lilting quality to it, and it took her a moment to realize that it was identical to the way Solas spoke elvhen. The language the two of them had spoken eons ago was considered dead and gone in modern Thedas, but its influence was still apparent in the way they spoke.

Near the center of the swiftly assembled camp was a tent of considerable size. It had clearly seen better days; numerous patches and stitched tears were evident by the light of the torches that were sputtering in defiance of the damp air. Geldauran directed her toward the tent, holding up one flap and gesturing her to proceed him inside. The interior was lit by a lantern attached to the central support pole. There was a single raised cot on one side, a small table with a chair next to it. It was to the chair that Geldauran pointed. Boone approached it and sat, feeling the first stirrings of a dread
that been forced aside by the greater power of her grief.

She watched wordlessly as Geldauran unbuckled the strap that crossed his chest, pulling the scabbard from his back. He laid the weapon on the bed before removing the smaller sword that rode at his waist and laying it down with the other. Disarmed, he took a seat on the bed and looked at Boone.

“There’s a great deal you must learn,” he told her, “and the time you have in which to learn it is constantly waning. From here it’s a game — we must stay ahead of Fen’Harel and his forces. They’re prolific and it’s only a matter of time before we are found.”

“And then?” she asked quietly.

His smile held no mirth. “And then the reckoning I spoke of. But that’s a matter for then. For now, I will speak and you will listen.”

He leaned forward, resting his arms across his knees. His stare was direct and unwavering, commanding her own. “I suspect you know something of my past, though I assume what details you were given were biased by Fen’Harel’s perspective or polluted by centuries of incorrect assumptions. It’s old history but some aspects are relevant just the same. Perhaps the most crucial thing you must know concerns Mythal’s death, and the truth is that she was slain by my hand. Yes,” he said, as Boone inhaled sharply in comprehension, “it all started there. Or rather, that is when the concept of the Dread Wolf was born.”

Despite everything, Boone was powerfully curious to hear what he would say. She was about to learn everything that the elves of Thedas had forgotten, everything that Solas had so carefully refrained from sharing with anyone other than his own people. “Why slay Mythal?” she asked.

“Because she dared to differ. Because she meddled. Because she threatened the future we had envisioned. Her defiance had the very real potential to undo all we had worked toward. It couldn’t go unchallenged. We tried reasoning, but she was beyond reason. In the end there was only one choice left to us. It was her son that issued the final decree, a decree that was fulfilled by myself, Daer’nthal, and Anaris. Mythal was slain. It should have ended there. It did not.”

“Solas.”

“Fen’Harel,” Geldauran corrected, nodding. “Solas was his first name, and the most fitting considering its meaning. Fen’Harel was the name he was given over time and it became the mantle he chose to wear, shaping the person he would become. He was always beloved of Mythal, always quick and eager to be disagreeable with the rest of us in any way possible. We had anticipated his reaction to her death, but had not foreseen the scope. He’s nothing if not clever; the legends are accurate in that regard. He evaded us and seemingly vanished, only to reappear some time later, the leader of the rebellion that would sunder the Elvhenan.”

“But you…” she hesitated, but pressed on. “You made slaves of your own people. You sought to subjugate even more.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you would blame Solas?”

Grim amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes, quirked one side of his mouth. “I see that in this too you’ve been mislead, Lady Trevelyan. Think you that none of the ancient Elvhen bore the vallaslin of Fen’Harel?”
“No.” Boone shook her head in stunned disbelief. “No.”

“Yes. For a time. Until Mythal spoke out against it, until he allowed himself to fall under her manipulations, he was as the rest of us: a ruler. A king. The very thing he so fiercely fought against years later, a past he could not erase from memory no matter how hard he tried. I suppose time has done him that particular favor. Very few living know the real truth, and now you, Evelyn, are among that number. Will I have his thanks for that, I wonder?”

It was a question to which he expected no answer. He leaned back, regarding her still as she struggled to process all she had been told. Her knowledge of the Evanuris had been strictly limited to that which Solas had revealed to her in the Crossroads and the tales and rumors that had spread like wildfire after the fall of the Veil. Freed from their banishment, the Evanuris had fallen to Solas and his forces, death their final punishment after eons spent banished from the waking world. She had believed it because she had no reason not to, just as she had no reason to believe Geldauran now.

“You think perhaps I lie to you,” he said, correctly interpreting her thoughts, “or at least you hope that I do.”

Boone couldn’t look at him. Her eyes remained fixed at a point over his shoulder.

“I have shared only the truth. You’re beginning to realize now the levels of deception Fen’Harel uses to obscure, to divert attention from his true intent. It’s what he does; it’s what he ever did. He did not earn the moniker of ‘Trickster’ without merit, as convoluted as Dalish legend has become over time. To Fen’Harel, artifice was as natural as breathing — and apparently still is. Look at me,” he ordered, and reluctantly she obeyed, her eyes slowly dragging back to his face. “I know you’ve seen evidence of it all, ensconced as you’ve been within Era’Adahlen. What lies has he told you to earn your trust? Which of his omissions led you to becoming the Inquisitor yet again after years of living in anonymity?”

She didn’t respond. She didn’t have to. He already knew. “For all his suspicions, for all his caution, Fen’Harel was unable to completely prevent our infiltration. As his reach expanded and grew, so too has mine, despite the way he hunts us. Not all Elvhen aspire to live in some sham of harmony, side by side with races that are and always have been inferior. Some wish to know life as it once was, before the Veil, when our kind was the pinnacle of everything that was and everything that could be.”

“But that’s not possible. Solas tried — it’s the entire reason he destroyed the Veil.”

“Yes. That’s a reality that is well known by all elvhen within Thedas. And it’s that reality that led to the dissidence in Fen’Harel’s ‘reborn’ Elvhenan. He promised those that flocked to him the one thing that was an impossibility. He promised them immortality. He promised them a connection to the Fade. And when all was said and done, when the Veil was gone and the two worlds were again one, that promise faded to dust. Oh, he had other things to offer — an actual nation for the elvhen and a city to call their own. But some among them couldn’t forget the lives they’d lived before, in alienages or in bondage. Some didn’t want to forget, didn’t want to work toward peace with Orlais and Tevinter and Ferelden. Some wanted justice, and it was to me they turned to see it exacted.”

Boone lifted a hand to rub at her right temple where a dull, throbbing pain had begun. Helplessly lost, caught between falsities and factualities, she could do nothing but attempt to learn more. “But you… you are as he is.”

“No.” She saw the flicker in his eyes before it was gone, a spark of fury older than recorded time. Even that brief glimpse was chilling; it raised the hair on her arms. “In creating the Veil and banishing us behind it, Fen’Harel ensured we would never again be a threat to him or any other. The
very instant the Veil came into existence we were severed from ourselves, from time, from all that was arcane. We were crippled and crippled we remained for years beyond measure. When he destroyed the Veil and both realities bled together, we were nothing more than shadows of what we had once been.” His voice had taken on a bitter edge. “We were mortal, with all the inherent failings.”

“Yet you lived.”

Another of his disturbing smiles. “What I lacked in power, I made up for in guile. There were a great many of us waiting on the other side, my brethren and our thralls. In the aftermath of the Veil’s destruction, chaos reigned. We took advantage of it, me and mine, and left the others to fling themselves at Fen’Harel and his army, blind with their useless rage. Our escape did not come without a cost.” His expression sobered as he gestured to indicate his people without the tent’s confines. “We lost many.”

“I thought only the Evanuris were sealed away?”

“Of course you did. Fen’Harel would not dare speak of the others caught up in the tide of his retaliatory magic. We were all banished, yes, and so too those who had sworn fealty to us, our families and all those we loved. Anyone who opposed the Dread Wolf’s insurgency was imprisoned behind the Veil.”

Boone’s eyes were on the door of the tent. When she spoke, it was something very akin to awe. “Those outside… they are ancient Elvhen?”

“She is silent for a time, thinking. Geldauran waited patiently. Finally she asked, “You say you are crippled, without power. How is it that Solas was unable to locate you and the rest of the Mien’Harel?”

“I never said I was entirely bereft. What remains of the power I once commanded is muted, a weak and wavering echo of what it once was. I wield less magic now than one of your fledgling mages. As for Solas’ inability to locate us, I can only assume it’s an unexpected side benefit of transitioning from this world to the Fade and back again. Whatever the cause, it renders us inscrutable to Fen’Harel’s methods of scrying. It worked to our advantage for quite some time, until he was able to accomplish the admittedly commendable feat of uniting the Ehlvenan with Ferelden and Orlais.”

There were many, many other questions swarming to the forefront of her mind, but one stood out above all the rest. “Why?” she asked quietly. “Why kill as you’ve done? Farmers and villagers, people who’ve done nothing but attempt to live their lives. And why elves as well as humans?”

“Come now, Evelyn, you know those answers already. But perhaps you wish to hear me say them all aloud as a confession? Very well, you’ll have it.” He extended his arms, palms pressed together in a mock plea for forgiveness. “We kill because we have no reason not to. This is not the destiny I was to have. This is not the life I was to lead. For many centuries I existed as something entirely beyond your ability to comprehend. Now I am…” He trailed off, fluttering one hand in the air with a self-deprecating twist of the lips. “Fen’Harel will be made to rue all that he has done. I no longer have the power to confront him on equal ground, so instead I pick away at the foundation of all that he holds dear. The Ehlvenan is in a tenuous place internally and externally. Our raids upon human and elvhen alike made it even more so.” He paused, chin lifting, pale eyes narrowing slightly. “Until you.”

There was something inimical woven into those two words, a soft malevolence that made her mouth go dry. That Geldauran was the enemy had never been in question, but the realization that he was
completely committed to being *her* enemy was something she hadn’t had the energy to focus on before. Now she was faced with it, helpless against it. Her pulse quickened.

“Years ago, my own were able to insinuate themselves into various positions within the Ehlvenan. Some Fen’Harel discerned; others he didn’t. Those that remained were careful in their methods, cautious, never pushing too hard for too much. And so it was that over time I came to learn of you, the former leader of the Inquisition, a human woman that Fen’Harel seemed to have an unusual attachment to. You must know by now that he had been searching for you for a long time. You were an unknown factor to me, but one that had the potential of providing an advantage. We began looking for you as well, to no avail. To your credit, you hid yourself well. Until that day…”

He paused, giving her time to remember that night so many months ago when she and Thom had been in the company of the Landers siblings, when they had been ambushed by a group of Elvhen and Solas’ agent had walked away with the journal containing all the secrets of her true identity.

“Despite Fen’Harel’s intrinsic need for secrecy, word spread throughout the Ehlvenan’s higher echelons that you had been found. The exact location was never revealed, but my people ensured his every move was accounted for. And that’s how we found you at that farm. At first I’d intended to deliver a quick death — I hadn’t known then that Fen’Harel’s intentions for you went far beyond any matter of political gain. The attack on the farm had been a hastily constructed plan and one destined to fail, it seems. You slipped through our grasp, directly into his. But not all opportunity was lost. It was simply a matter of waiting, watching, and learning.”

“And a great deal I did learn,” he continued, watching her carefully. “I learned that there was more to the past you and Fen’Harel shared than that of Inquisitor and advisor. I learned that you meant enough to him that he scoured the vast archives of *Vir Dithara* to resurrect a sorcery long lost in order to gift you with this.” He touched two fingers to the wrist of her artificial arm. She snatched it away. “I learned that he intended to use you, as I’d suspected all along, as a way to compel the human nations into aligning with the Elvhenan. But of what he really felt for you — and you for him — I heard only rumors and hearsay. I could only speculate, but speculation is an unreliable tool when devising a rebellion. Months passed. Your life in the city formed a pattern. And once your friend Blackwall returned, I had all the knowledge I needed to proceed.”

The mention of Thom brought immediate tears to her eyes. She averted her face. Her next words were choked. “Your people guarded the farm?”

“Two had earned themselves positions in the guard units assigned there. Three more of my people, disguised as messengers from the Elvhenan, rode to the farm that night shouting of the city on fire and of war within it. The Keep had fallen, they shouted, and that was enough — though in truth, the fire itself was truly the only distraction needed. It kept Fen’Harel’s attention wholly diverted. My men at the farm opened the gate from the inside. The rest you already know: more dead, elves and human. Two humans,” he added with cruel emphasis, “in particular.”

She looked at him then, a baleful glare punctuated by the sheen of tears. He acknowledged her enmity with a short laugh. “Such anger, Evelyn! I imagine you’ve had enough of it to last a lifetime, given the way Fen’Harel has used nearly every aspect of your life to further his plans. Such a thing would be enough to foster a deep and abiding hatred… but not for you.”

It was suspended in the air between them, his insinuation and her admittance. Neither voiced their part.

“Humans very rarely surprise me,” he said softly, “but you do. And I think that there’s more about you I must learn in our short time together. Not tonight,” he said, rising abruptly. “Tomorrow. Now we eat and then sleep.”
He exited the tent, leaving her alone unbound and ungagged. There was no point in restraining her. There was nowhere to run to, no way to escape, only an inexorable road forward into a future full of terrifying uncertainty. When Geldauran returned a short time later, he wasn’t alone. An elven woman with short cropped vibrant red hair accompanied him, carrying two small cloth sacks. Boone watched in silence as the woman approached the table and began to remove various foodstuff from the bags: bread, a wedge of cheese, apples, dried meat, and a flask. Once finished, she dipped her head at Geldauran and cast a fleeting glance at Boone, who marked the presence of the vallaslin upon her face. The woman departed from the tent.

Geldauran seated himself upon the edge of the bed once more, breaking off a hunk of bread. “Eat,” he directed. “It’s not quite the same as the feasts you’ve become accustomed to, but it’s all you’ll be getting.”

Boone mutely looked over the meager array of food and felt her stomach turn at the thought of ingesting any of it. “I cannot.” she murmured.

“Eat of your own volition or I will feed it to you.”

He said it casually, but the threat was distinct. For a span of seconds she debated refusing, debated forcing his hand. His eyes upon hers were steady as he waited to see what she would choose. Her gaze fell, and she reached for the flask.

“Obedience suits you.” he remarked. She ignored him, eating slowly, woodenly, willing her stomach not to rebel and reject every mouthful she swallowed. Once finished she sat in silence as he finished the last of the cheese, washing it down with water from the flask.

“You’ll sleep here,” he told her, rising and stripping a blanket from the cot. He tossed it to her; her reaction was too slow and it draped itself over her shoulder. She rose and he pointed to the corner where a long wooden pallet lay in the mud. Blanket clutched in both hands she walked to it and after a moment of hesitation, lowered herself onto it. Geldauran was methodically stripping himself of his armor. She turned onto her side, toward the tent wall, and covered herself with the blanket. There was nothing else to do then but will sleep to come, to remove her from the waking world, to take her with it and never let her go.

.x.

A hand on her shoulder shook her awake. “We must go.”

It took her a moment to place the voice, and when she did, she closed her eyes again in dismay. She rolled over slowly, transitioning into a sitting position with a body stiff from a day of hard riding and night of sleeping on the uncomfortable pallet. Geldauran stood near the cot, facing away as he donned his armor. He half-turned his head in order to speak to her over his shoulder.

“There’s food on the table. Make haste.”

Sounds filtered in from beyond the confines of the tent — voices, the soft nicker of horses, accompanied by the many other sounds of the camp being swiftly disassembled. Boone rose, folding the blanket she’d been given and tucking it under her arm. She approached the small table hesitantly, loathe to be near Geldauran, and without looking at him set the blanket upon it. There was a small wedge of cheese and a dried out apple; she took the former, breaking it off in chunks. As she ate she drifted closer to the tent flap, lifting it to peer outside. It was still dark without. There was only the merest hint of an orange glow on the horizon to the west. Geldauran stepped up beside her, fastening his sword belt. He took note of what she was gazing at.
“We’ve no time to linger,” he said as he exited the tent, holding up the flap so that she could exit behind him. “The Dread Wolf hunts.”

He left her there, striding out into the camp, calling out orders. She stood there uncertainly while around her the members of the Mien’Harel performed their various tasks. It was only a short time later when Geldauran reappeared, leading both his own horse and Hob. He handed Boone the reins, but as she went to mount he stopped her with a shake of his head. Wrapped around his wrist was a length of dark cloth and as he unwound it she took a step backward in recognition. It was the blindfold she’d worn the day previous.

“How?" she asked.

He gave her a searching look. “You surely must know by now.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “Or perhaps not,” he said with something that sounded like mild surprise. He held out the length of cloth and after a long moment of hesitation she took it from him. As he watched she mounted Hob, and once astride, covered her eyes with the blindfold and fastened it behind her head. She blindly turned her head in Geldauran’s direction, awaiting further orders.

“We ride,” was all he said.

.x.

The day passed far too slowly for Boone’s liking. It wasn’t long before the pain returned to her thighs, knees, and posterior, and as the hours passed it began to radiate up into her back. When she and Thom had traveled the length and breadth of Ferelden and Orlais in the past, they’d always made sure to pause in between long periods of riding in order to stretch and relieve whatever aches had developed. The Mien’Harel allowed themselves no such luxury.

Boone had no real idea of where they were. A hard day’s ride in any direction from the Storm Coast could put them in several areas. They could be south, well into the Bannorn, but that would mean they were coming perilously close to Era’Adahlen and she was certain Geldauran would avoid doing so. If they’d headed east they could be nearing Harper’s Ford. West or southwest could put them anywhere between West Hill and Mistmoor. There really was no way for her to know without some kind of identifying landmark; she’d been far too distraught upon leaving the farm to take heed of which direction Geldauran had chosen.

The weather held fair as they rode. Spring had truly come. The pace was the same as it had been before, Hob moving at a brisk trot that occasionally slowed to a walk, his reins held by another rider. Freed of having to control her mount, prevented from observing the passing sights, Boone became immersed in her thoughts. Thom and Movda were foremost always. It was the little things about them she recalled to her, lingering over the odd comfort the old woman’s dry smile would bring her, visualizing the gradually increasing encroach of grey into the thick, long strands of Thom’s dark hair. She wept quietly, swaying in the saddle, fingers clutching at the pommel. Her heart was already broken, she knew this — it had broken the moment they’d both died. But it felt now like it was still breaking, as though whatever shards remained were fracturing into smaller and smaller pieces while around her the world cruelly continued on, unmoved and unconcerned.

There was another that struggled to feature prominently in her thoughts but she possessed enough control still to ensure that he was kept at bay. She was too numb to dwell on Solas, to dwell on the maybe truths and possible lies Geldauran had told her, too far entrenched in the bleak mire of grief to think on the fact that he had known Geldauran still lived and said nothing of it. Solas was a different thing from a different life. In spite of the emptiness she knew now, she hoped that she would not live to become the instrument against Solas that Geldauran intended her to be.
When the Mien’Harel called a halt, it was not yet evening. She waited until she heard Geldauran’s spoken directive before reaching up to remove the blindfold. She blinked against the bright light of day, ducking her head until her eyes adjusted. The leader of the Mien’Harel had already dismounted and handed off the reins of his horse to one of his company. Under his observation Boone slid down from Hob’s back, biting back a groan as pain soared up her legs and into her ribs the moment her feet hit the ground. She leaned against the gelding for a moment, dredging up the will to keep herself from collapsing. Hob turned his large head, nosing at Boone’s sides in search of hidden treats. She ran her hand over his forelock before pushing herself away and looking at Geldauran.

“Come.” He beckoned for her to follow.

They’d chosen to halt at the base of a large hill. Trees spilled down its side, conifers and aspens both, to encircle the space the Mien’Harel had chosen to camp in. A small creek meandered through the grass nearby and several of the horses had been led there to drink. As before, the members of Geldauran’s company were all busy, engaged in the various duties required to strike up a camp of this size. Geldauran strode through the hub of activity with long strides; Boone had to hasten to keep up. He led her up a gentle, grassy slope and down the other side, up another incline, until they walked through the forest proper. He said nothing and didn’t bother to look to see if she followed, so secure was he in his own authority. It was several minutes later before he came to a halt in a small clearing, turning on the spot to survey the area. He gestured wordlessly to a wide tree a couple of feet away. Boone looked from the tree to him and back again before approaching it and sitting down, her back to the ridged trunk. A fragrant yellow arnica grew in the shade cast by the foliage and she skimmed its petals with her fingers while Geldauran settled himself on the ground before her.

“What are we doing here?” she asked. Her voice was almost hoarse; these were the first words she’d spoken in hours.

“I’m going to read to you.”

She couldn’t keep the incredulous noise escaping her mouth. He heard it, smiled a little in response. From a small leather satchel that rode at his hip he removed a book. She needed only to see it once to recognize it. The sound she made next was one of pure dismay. It was the journal she’d kept as Inquisitor.

“I cannot fault you for thinking it would be secure and safe from prying eyes back at the farm,” he told her, tapping the leather cover of the book. “Most would think such a little thing to be of no consequence.”

Boone couldn’t help herself — she lunged forward, grabbing at the book. He swept it away, holding it aloft beyond her reach. “I’m certainly not the only one privy to what secrets are written here, am I?” She said nothing, glaring at him. “No, these secrets belong to Fen’Harel as well, and now they belong to me.”

“They are not yours!” She got to her knees, flinging herself at him, blind with enraged indignation. It was a struggle that was over before it began. He shoved her hard back against the tree, so hard that her head connected with the trunk, so hard that she could do nothing in the seconds after but breathe and blink, dazed.

She heard the sound of pages turning, heard him hum softly in mock contemplation. Her head lolled around so that she could look at him and she watched, immersed in a strange kind of dread, as he perused the pages containing her most personal writing with an insultingly casual air. Finally he paused, finger skimming the paper, and raised his eyes to hers.

“This will prove particularly enlightening, I think,” he said, and cleared his throat before he began to
Soft-Fade touched light, in dream-lit tones, falls dark.
Each form a memory, recalled through parted lips,
That try to speak, fall silent. Before light marks
The dawn, from sleeping fingers she slips
Into the day, where averted eyes bend
To any but the other. Oathsworn
To Lion’s call, yet here the two are broken
As waxing sickle stands witness to the end
Of love’s denial and secrets borne,
From parted lips, the words at last are spoken.

I discovered this poem three days ago. “Ameridan and the Mage.” The papers accompanying it stated it was a banned text from ages past, an embellished romantic portrayal of the rumored relationship between Inquisitor Ameridan and the dreamer mage Telana. It was, in its time, widely regarded as a blasphemous lie.

It wasn’t.

The love between Ameridan and Telana was real. I know this, because I encountered her spirit. The story that claimed otherwise was but one falsehood buried within the larger tale of Ameridan. In my time spent in Frostback Basin I have uncovered many truths, some lost to the ravages of time, others hidden intentionally. Ameridan was an elf of the Dales. What’s more, he was a mage, a mage that was personally appointed to be the leader of the Seekers by Emperor Drakon I himself. He kept strange company, or ‘strange’ as dictated by the societal standards of that time — the dwarven alchemist, Orinna. The templar Haron. A spirit that accompanied him during his struggle against the Jaws of Hakkon. And his lover Telana, the elven Dreamer mage.

My thoughts keep returning to Telana and Ameridan. There are parallels between my life and Ameridan’s own despite our differences in heritage, parallels that I cannot deny no matter how I wish I could. I did not have time to dwell on these revelations at first, so caught up were we in the struggle against the Jaws of Hakkon. It was only after, when the victory celebrations filled the night air of Stone Bear Hold, that I was able to slip away. I wandered down the stone paths, smiling and greeting all those I passed, inwardly beset by a strange melancholy. I had no reason to feel this way. We had defeated Hakkon. I had spoken to Ameridan himself. But still I could not help but feel heartsick, unable to appreciate the evening’s revelry. My wandering led me to the shore. In the
distance I could spy the island, shrouded partially by thin tendrils of fog. Telana had spent the remainder of her life there, attempting through dreams to reach the man she loved.

It was not difficult to take the boat, though I struggled a little with the heft of the oars at first. Around me the waters were dark and still, though faint sounds of laughter and music carried down from the hold. I rowed steadily, my path aligned to the stars that observed from above. The way the boat glided through the water soothed me, and I was content to lose myself in the sounds of my rowing, watching as the island gained definition and shape the closer I came. Upon arrival I guided my vessel to the dilapidated dock, or as close as I could manage. I swung my legs over the side, splashing toward shore as I pulled the boat with me. The small island was dark, but there was light enough provided by the half moon above that I was able to make my way across the rocky shore and up across the grass until I found the remains of the small wooden hut where Telana had lived the last of her days. There was a large, flat rock near the hut, and it was there I settled, sitting cross-legged and laying my bow across my knees.

“Ameridan… Ameridan, why?”

The echoes of Telana’s spirit still lingered, her words a lament that had haunted this island since her death nearly eight hundred years ago. In those words lingered an anguish I had never know, an anguish I hoped never to know — the terrible, unfathomable sorrow of loving someone who will remain forever lost. But I envied Telana her grief. I envied that she had loved so fiercely as to commit herself to it even when all hope had gone. Most of all, I envied that someone had loved her just as passionately, that even within the inevitable tragedy of their lives they had had each other. I could not help but think on my own life in comparison. Love, it seemed, was not something fate intended for me. I had hoped that with Cullen, in time, our fledgling affections would grow to become something more substantial, something that would last. It did not, and the fault was entirely my own. Despite desperately wanting to, I could not learn to love him. My heart refused to relinquish its foolish fixation it had on the elf apostate that served as my advisor and companion. Cullen knew. He never said as much but he knew, and when I confessed to him how I truly felt, he offered me only empathy and understanding. He is a good man, a better man than most any other, and I wish things could have gone differently between us.

“Sleep. I need to… I must find you.”

My heart ached for Telana as I envisioned her here on this island, spending her days drifting from one waking dream to another in an effort to find Ameridan. She had feared him dead. She never knew that he was still alive, imprisoned within an arcane limbo in order to sustain the bindings he’d placed on the spirit of Hakkon. Once his bindings had released, time exacted the toll it had been too long denied, and he faded to dust before our eyes. I hoped that he was able to reunite with Telana in the whatever existence was to be found beyond death, that the two of them could come together again to know the joy and contentment that was denied them in life.

“I slept, to find him in dreaming…”

I sighed, bowing my head. I could no longer deny that I may die alone. There were any number of threats vying to take my life on a daily basis. If not demons, then Venatori. And should they fail, there were always red templars, and I couldn’t of course forget the very substantial, considerable peril that Corypheus himself posed. And should I survive that inevitable confrontation, I always had the Anchor to consider. It was looking more and more likely that Inquisitor Evelyn Trevelyan would meet her end alone. What a comforting thought. I lifted a hand to rub at my eyes. There was a burning sensation behind them, but no tears — perhaps I was far too emotionally exhausted this night to shed them. I felt a pang of remorse for wallowing in self-pity when everyone else was enjoying triumphant festivities, but after a moment I shrugged it off. Like anyone, I was permitted to
have feelings. I just had to make an effort to deal with them when nobody else was around.

Time passed. I remained where I was, listening to the occasional fragment of Telana’s lingering voice, idly tracing paths with my eyes between the stars that glittered above. Melancholy as I was, there was a sense of peace here. I welcomed it. Too soon the sun would rise and bring with it any number of problems that ranged in degree of catastrophic direness. I would remain here, taking comfort in the solitude.

A sound came to me then, the scuff of a foot on stone. My fingers curled around the grip of my bow and I shifted, half-rising, turning to see what had come to intrude.

“Solas,” I said on a sigh that I’m sure managed to clearly convey my resignation, frustration, and sorrow. On the evening I chose to spend mourning my lack of romantic attachment, the man I cared deeply for had of course chosen to appear.

His brow was furrowed. He looked uncharacteristically unsure for a moment. He leaned on his staff and I wanted nothing more than for him to turn around, to leave the island and its odd, saddening comfort to me and me alone. A thought occurred to me, and I couldn’t help but ask, “How did you get here? I took the only boat.”

He lifted one hand and I watched as frost coated his fingers, as the air around them steamed. “I have my methods,” he told me.

“The celebration is back at the hold.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Then why are you here?”

His frown had deepened. I was being unusually direct. “I was concerned for you.”

“There was no need. Hakkon is dead. All that lies here are fragments of sad memories and voices.”

“Perhaps that’s why I’m concerned.”

I huffed another sigh, turning away from him and resuming my seat on the stone. From the periphery of my vision I could see him moving, taking several steps toward me. “I merely wanted to be alone,” I said. “Away from the noise. Away from the music.” I heard my voice take on a brittle edge despite my effort to prevent it. “Away from people.”

It was as unsubtle a hint as I could drop. I willed him to take it, refusing to look at him.

After a moment of silence, he spoke. “But perhaps, most of all, away from me?”

I did look at him then. “Yes.”

He held my gaze for a span of several seconds before his eyes dropped. “I cannot fault you for that.”

“I think perhaps you wish you could.”

He surprised me by nodding. “It would make things easier. The guilt would be less crippling.”

I felt my mouth curve into an unhappy smile. “The guilt of knowing how I feel about you, or the guilt of knowing how much you’ve hurt me by turning me away?”
“Both.” That one word wavered slightly. His eyes were still downcast, but he wore such a conflicted expression then that the urge to rise and go to him, to offer him comfort, was nearly overwhelming. I found myself shaking my head, willing that ridiculous impulse to fade into oblivion. Solas would get no comfort from me.

“You could leave,” I offered. “You could leave the Inquisition. I would grant you that. You owe no allegiance to me or anyone else.”

He inhaled sharply, as though I’d given him grave insult. Judging from the way his head snapped up and his eyes narrowed, it was safe to say that I had. “I would not leave, not with things the way they are.”

“I wish you would.” It was a partial truth.

“This cruelty doesn’t become you, Inquisitor,” he said with a coldness I’d never heard from him before.

“No, I suppose it doesn’t. But I’m tired of being pleasant. I’m tired of pretending that I’m completely fine. I’m tired. I’m hurt. And I want someone else to hurt the way I do, because nobody knows… and I cannot possibly let them. The Inquisitor must never come undone.”

Ah, there they were, those tears I’d wondered about earlier. They flooded my eyes and I averted my face far too slowly for them to go unseen.

“Vhenan… I’m dreaming…”

Telana’s words again. Would that I could dream as she had, wandering from one unreality into another in order to leave the waking world behind. Solas stirred; I whipped my head around, pinioning him with a watery glare. I didn’t want his sympathy or his pity or his words. I wanted him gone, away from me, away too from the weakened, cracked thing my heart had become.

“She died alone,” I told him. “She died alone, but at least she’d known love. She’d had Ameridan, had shared his burdens, had endured the same tribulations he had. She was his and he was hers and that is something I will never know. Whatever future that awaited me before that held love and romance and companionship is dead and gone, withered by this fucking mark on my hand. A normal life will never be mine and that’s all I want. It’s what I long for, more than anything else. Another life, a different life, away from the Breach, away from the Inquisition,” I paused, sucking in a shaking breath, “away from you.”

Solas was motionless, blurred in my vision. “Can you grant me that, Solas? Can you remove the Anchor, destroy Corypheus, fix the world?”

His response was deathly quiet. “No.”

“Then you are of no use to me.”

He moved, striding swiftly forward until he stood before me. I craned my head back to look up at him and there was such fury on his face, etched into every line and crease. Had I not been suffused entirely with vindictive satisfaction at the sight, I may have felt a little afraid.

“Berate me,” I said, baiting him. “Chastise me. Tell me I’m behaving like a child. It’s all true, I know it, but I cannot help myself, not tonight. Tonight it’s safer for everyone to be as far away from me as possible. Particularly you.”

He said nothing.
“What right do you have?” I asked in nothing more than a whisper. Such was the stillness of the night that the words seemed to cross between worlds just as Telana’s did. “What right do you have to be angry with me? It’s I that should be angry at you, and I am, but it’s so much more than that …” I shook my head. “You tell me there can be nothing between us, but the way you talk to me, the way you’ve touched me — it gives me hope. It makes me curious. And then you turn me aside, claiming it’s better for us both, and I’m left with nothing.”

I stood, forcing Solas to step back. “You try to be so careful with that mask you wear, never letting anyone catch a glimpse of what’s hidden beneath. But I’ve seen it. I’ve seen it in the way you look at me sometimes, when you’re not quick enough to hide it away. It’s simple enough, as I see it — if you truly feel nothing for me, avoid me. Don’t speak to me. Treat me as you would a stranger. But you don’t. And every time we speak, every time we’re together I feel it, this connection you try so hard not to name, to will into non-existence.”

Still no response.

“You know what you do to me, Solas.” I had taken a small step forward, expecting him to give way before me. He did not. We were close, very close, and the tension between us was a tangible thing, coils of want and denial and confusion winding around us both. “There’s no way you couldn’t. You could avoid me — I wish you would. But still you persist, presenting yourself as my companion, my advisor, my friend. Why?”

“I am all of those things.”

“Are you?”

Yet again, he didn’t deign to answer. Moonlight slanted across his face, painting it in a stark light. I saw nothing in his eyes; they were shuttered, closed, sealed. His defenses were firmly in place. Mine were in ruins.

I eased past him, gaining space to stand freely. He turned to watch as I moved, as I walked to the door of Telana’s hut, as I lingered at the threshold. “Make it easier on us both,” I told him. “Give me your advice and nothing more. Let my only concerns be those of the Breach and Corypheus and not those of my heart.”

We regarded each other from several feet apart. He looked foreign to me, cold and distant, his expression as impassive as I’d ever seen it. Feigned or not, his indifference stung, though it was what I’d just asked for. For too long I’d clung to frayed, tenuous hopes that we could eventually make our way beyond our designated roles to find each other. Those hopes had lessened me, diverted my attention from matters of importance. No longer. I would harden myself. And as I thought this I studied him carefully, accounting for every angle of his face, for the cut of his mouth, the arch of his brows, the shape of his eyes. I studied him as to commit him to memory, for the nature of our relationship would change irrevocably here and now.

“Leave me,” I said.

There was a long silence before he bowed his head stiffly. “As you wish, Inquisitor.”

I didn’t watch him go. I walked away, attempting to suppress the hurt, trying to pride myself on what I’d just done. Loose emotions were dangerous. They posed the constant threat of entanglement and that was a risk I could no longer take. The end was drawing near — Corypheus’ forces had withdrawn entirely to the Arbor Wilds. I knew that whatever conclusion awaited us all was not far off.
The next day we departed Stone Bear Hold and Frostback Basin, returning to Skyhold. Events have unfolded quickly since. Tomorrow we leave for the Arbor Wilds. Solas has not spoken to me, will not look at me. It seems I’ve gotten my wish.

.x.

Geldauran stopped speaking. Boone could not look at him, gaze fixated instead on the arnica rising amid tufts of grass beside her. Hearing her most private thoughts read aloud this way was humiliating and painful in ways she hadn’t anticipated. Her hands were clasped in her lap, knotted together so tightly that her knuckles ached.

“The Inquisitor in love,” Geldauran remarked, “and with an elven apostate, nonetheless. A potential recipe for catastrophe, considering the scope of all that Corypheus had wrought.”

She was unable to keep her eyes from flitting sideways to focus on his face. He’d laid her journal off to the side and was leaning back on his arms. He considered her in silence for a long while and she was unable to discern any of what he was thinking. Finally he sat up straight, head tilted slightly.

“What would you have done, if he’d told you the truth that night?”

His question took her aback. She looked away, unwilling to respond. His fingers captured her jaw, forcing her head back around. There was such coldness in his eyes, belying his casual tone, an ancient insidiousness directed not only at her, but to every living thing in Thedas. He’d dwelt in exile for nearly four thousand years, his hatred and malevolence festering. Now he was free and while he was a mere shadow of what he had once been, he was still beyond any doubt a danger unlike any she’d ever encountered before.

He said with deceiving gentleness, “Answer me.”

“I don’t know.”

“No? You loved him. If he’d told you everything in that moment, what would your first instinct have been?”

She hesitated; his grip on her chin tightened until she winced. “I don’t know!”

“What did you do, when he finally revealed all? You didn’t write of that encounter, at least not in this book.”

She felt the promise of more pain in the way his fingers flexed. Her voice scraped out, a raw and wounded sound. “I became a coward.”

“You didn’t fight him.”

“No.”

“He sent you back to the Inquisition.”

“Yes.”

“And then?”

“We returned to Skyhold. But I couldn’t stay — I couldn’t be anymore. I needed to go…”

“You were broken.”
Still held captive in his grip, she nodded. It was as though the unwavering directness of his eyes compelled her to speak, to make admissions she’d for so long kept buried. “Yes.”

“What happened then?”

“Thom… I told Thom. I had to leave but the others couldn’t know. Thom understood. He helped me slip away. We left the Inquisition behind.”

“And then you wandered, the two of you. You became something of a scribe, recording every tale of woe you could come across. Solas tore down the Veil and still you remained hidden, observing silently while the rest of the world went to war.” He paused, hand sliding down from her jaw to encircle her neck. “You were craven.”

It hurt to hear the truth so baldly. It hurt more than his touch, more than any of the words he’d spoken to her thus far. “Yes.”

“But you found solace after a time, living with the old woman at the farm. You told her everything about you and still she welcomed you. You found peace.”

She shook her head. More words spilled forth, unbidden. “Not peace. A reprieve. There was no peace after what I’d done.”

“What you hadn’t done,” he corrected. His hold around her neck was loose and she waited, holding her breath, to feel his fingers tighten. A large part of her wished for it. He guessed her train of thought; he gave her a dismissive half-smile, his hand falling away.

“Love,” he said, “is a potent form of destruction. Perhaps the purest. Kingdoms rise and fall for want or loss of it; I’ve been witness to such more than once. Even love without ardor leads to ruin. Mythal and Fen’Harel were proof enough of that.” He laid his hand on the cover of her journal. “You had the very real power to undo Fen’Harel without even being privy to his grander scheme. In his hubris, you were an unforeseen obstacle he’d never bothered to account for. And as much as it pains me to say this — and it does pain me — Fen’Harel’s resolve served him well. Allowing himself to love you would have been the end of his machinations, and I would have remained banished beyond the Veil for the rest of time.”

“What I wonder most, Evelyn, is what it is about you that drew Fen’Harel. You’re human. You’re fallible to a fault, ruled by emotions, ruled too by an inborn need to matter. Mankind is and always has been a lesser dominion. Nothing has changed since the age before the Veil save for the fact that without the presence of Arlathan, without the true Elvhen, your race has been able to grow and evolve unchallenged. It was never meant to be that way. The course mankind has taken — the course all races have taken — is an aberration.”

He spoke with such concise authority, an arrogance not assumed but inherent. In that moment she caught a glimpse of what he had been in ages past, a man that ruled with utter impunity, captivating in his blithe tyranny, in his every word and action. “What we knew of love, we Elvhen, is beyond anything you could ever fathom. Our bonds were more than mere feelings. We were connected on levels more than just emotional, more than just physical. Our unions defied any explanation I could possibly give to you now, defied too the restraints of time. And after having known that, after having lived it, Fen’Harel awoke from eons of sleep to grow attached to you. Why?”

He transitioned to one knee, bringing his face closer to her own, brows furrowed as he searched her countenance. It was as though he sought to peer past the barriers of flesh and bone into her mind, to look upon her thoughts in an effort to reveal everything she was, everything she had been. “I thought perhaps there was something about you I hadn’t yet discovered, some hidden aspect. But having
seen you, having spoken with you, having read your innermost thoughts I find there is nothing exceptional. There is only you, damaged and flawed. There’s only an unremarkable individual that became involved in a remarkable series of events through sheer bad luck. I had wondered originally if it was the Anchor’s lure that drew Fen’Harel, but you’ve lacked that for years and still he sought you out just to whisk you away, granting you levels of protection that very few others even within his new kingdom have seen. Of everything he’s ever done, now or before, it’s this that surprises me the most. He wasn’t immune to the influences of time. He’s changed in ways I think he’s not even aware of. He was always careful, always meticulous, and of every possible mistake that could have happened along the way, the only one he made was to allow himself to love you.”

Boone stared at him mutely. Every word he’d uttered had been calculated with the intent to wound. He’d been successful; hearing every honest evaluation of her self was no easy thing to endure. It was one thing to keep those thoughts clutched close to her, to mentally self-flagellate with those barbs of guilt and shame, but it was quite another to hear her every defect and shortcoming finally spoken aloud.

“Thus it shall end for him,” Geldauran said, “and for you. I own you now, and through you I will cripple him. Love,” he smirked, a baring of teeth, “is always useful, just not always in the ways you’d most expect.”

He picked up her journal and stood, looking down at her expectantly. She rose. He half-turned, eyeing the sky. “Plenty of daylight left,” he observed. “Plenty of time yet to begin your first lesson. Come, Evelyn.”

She had no choice but to follow.

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All Geldauran taught was cruelty.

Not far from where the Mien’Harel had established camp — less than an hour’s ride — was a farm. Seated on Hob, his reins held by the last Evanuris, she watched with rising dread as the more than a dozen of the elvhen descended upon the cluster of buildings on horseback. They acted with swift surety, dismounting and rousting the settlers from the houses and barn, riding through the fields to flush out those that worked within them.

“Why are you doing this?” Boone asked, terribly certain that she already knew the answer. Sensing her agitation, Hob shifted nervously beneath her, shaking his head and rattling the bit in his mouth.

Geldauran spared her a glance, but said nothing.

Driven by the threat of sword, spear, and arrow, the farmers had no choice but to go where they were herded, toward Geldauran and Boone. Large straw bales from from the past summer’s harvest had been stacked two on two nearby, and the farmers were made to line up in front of them. Boone’s eyes passed over them all — several men, a few women, six children. Multiple families, all of them eking out a respectable living off the land, all of them enjoying the simple life afforded simple folk — until now. Their shouted questions and demands went wholly unanswered by the Mien’Harel, and were effectively quieted by the ominous sound of bow strings being drawn taut. A silence fell, the fear suspended within it so potent as to almost be tasted.

“Don’t do this,” Boone pleaded in a whisper, knowing it would carry anyway. “They’re innocent!”

“Yes,” Geldauran said evenly. “As have been all the rest.”
He nudged his horse with his heels, moving forward and pulling Hob and Boone along with him. The _Mien’Harel_ assembled in a half circle around the farmers opened ranks to let them through. Geldauran halted his horse, surveying the sight before him.

“Do you know this woman?”

He’d pitched his voice to carry. He received no answer at first, the gathered humans looking in bewildered terror at each other, searching for answers they didn’t have. One of the _Mien’Harel_ wielding a spear move forward with his weapon held at the ready. It was precisely the type of wordless threat needed to spur them into cooperation. “We don’t know her,” a man called back, clutching the hand of a woman cradling a young child.

“This is Evelyn Trevelyan. The Inquisitor, long lost during times of strife, now found.”

Boone sat astride Hob unmoving as a dozen pairs of eyes fixed on her. She felt their confusion in those stares, their fear, felt too their judgment and accusations. Not nearly enough time had passed for the Inquisitor and the Inquisition to be forgotten. Words meant for supplication filled her throat, unable to slip past each other, working themselves into knots. She swallowed in an attempt to dislodge them, in an attempt to let them spill forth in rapid, desperate succession, to no avail. They wouldn’t come.

“Inquisitor Trevelyan, former savior of Ferelden and Orlais. Granted the ability to seal the rifts and banish the demons, to protect people just like you from everything that lurked beyond the Veil. Her power — and that of the Inquisition — lent the world hope. Until Fen’Harel. Until the Sundering.”

Geldauran paused, turning his head to look at her. “She was nowhere to be found then.”

Silence, broken only by the soft weeping of a child, by the hushed, urgent whispers of its mother. What was about to happen was a horrifying inevitability. Every muscle in Boone’s body was taut with fear, with despair, with a helpless, leashed rage so similar but so different from what she’d known before. Her hands were clenched upon her thighs, and her thoughts raced, playing over every possibility open before her and knowing that each and every one of them would fail.

“She watched as the Veil came down, as the world beyond it bled into this one. She watched fire and chaos consume this land. That’s what she did. That’s _all_ she did. And now she’s come to watch you die.”

The screaming started as Geldauran raised his hand, intensified as he let it fall. Boone leapt from the saddle, lunging for the nearest of the _Mien’Harel_, grabbing at his bow. He fumbled, his shot going wide, but it didn’t matter just as she’d known it wouldn’t. Other arrows flew. Boone ran for the farmers but was wrenched back by Geldauran’s hand fisted in her hair. She cried out, the agonized sound mingling with the others filling the air. He kicked at the back of her legs and she collapsed to her knees; he followed her down, wrapping one arm around her throat.

“You’ll watch,” he told her, his breath hot in her ear. “You _will_ bear witness.”

He held her head immobile, fingers still tangled in her hair, tight against her scalp. She closed her eyes, wrenched them open again when she heard the ululating wail of a child. Her eyes found the origin of the sound, found that the weeping child had been skewered by a spear, impaled to a bale of straw. Another scream, another blur of movement, and Boone watched through streaming tears as an old man was gutted by the blade of an axe. She twisted in Geldauran’s hold, freeing herself enough to jam an elbow back into his ribs, to take advantage of his pained grunt and wrench free. She made it to one knee and he slammed into her, knocking her to the ground, using his weight to keep her pinned by straddling her lower back. His fingers knotted in her hair again, forcing her head around until blades of grass and dirt were pressed against her cheek, until her gaze was once again fixed
forward to watch the slaughter. The stuttering cry of an infant pierced her as no blade could, and with a choking moan she screwed her eyes shut.

“Open them!” Geldauran hissed. “Open them or I will leave some alive and take them apart, piece by piece, day by day!” He leaned over her, his voice deepening, a sound of such focused malice that she could feel it in pinpricks that clawed their way up her spine. “Open your eyes. You owe them that much, at least.”

Driven by the incontestable power of his threat, she obeyed. She watched, helpless beneath him, sobs wracking her body. The Mien'Harel were expedient but not without appreciation for their task. Butchering was to some of them an art. None were spared. When it was over, when the last ragged whimper had died, Geldauran ordered the bodies and limbs stacked before the straw bales. It wasn’t until that task was fulfilled that he climbed off of Boone.

“Had we the time,” he said as she slowly sat up, “I’d arrange a tableau for Fen’Harel to find. But this will suffice.” Raising his voice, he issued one final command to his men. “Burn it all.”

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All details of the ride back to camp escaped Boone. She was aware of voices and laughter, aware too of Hob’s movement, of every breath she took — breaths denied the men, women, and children they’d just left behind. Every death was branded into her now, just as Geldauran had intended. Whatever mercy he may have once had was gone, perhaps eroded by the passage of time, trapped as he’d been behind the Veil. He’d warned Boone that he wouldn’t grant her a quick death and he’d meant it. What he intended was to break her apart slowly, methodically, until she begged him for the end. No small part of her wanted to beg him now, but it was too soon, far too soon. He needed her alive in order bring Solas — and everything he’d strove to build for his people — to ruin.

Later, as she lay on the pallet within the tent, she wept again. She was alone; Geldauran was without, mingling with his kind. He hadn’t spoken to her at all since departing the farm and she was grateful for it. His voice had the combined effect of making her skin crawl while kindling to life a boundless, impotent fury. She had once thought she’d seen the full extent of what cruelty the races of Thedas were capable of. She’d been wrong.

When finally she slept, she dreamed of Solas.

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Chapter End Notes

So this chapter has pushed me over 100k words, making this the longest fic I’ve ever written. Neat.

Over the holidays I wrote a standalone piece featuring Boone: When the rivers overrun

My thanks once more to Silenceatemycat for looking things over with this chapter and all the rest to come.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!