**Sorrow and Solace**

**by** [Wildmooncat](#)

**Summary**

Lavellan struggles with the consequences of drinking from the Vir'abelasan. She sets out on a quest to understand the Well's mysterious power, but when her path crosses Solas, Lavellan finds herself caught in the middle of plans centuries in the making. Most events take place between the death of Corypheus and the afterward scene with Flemeth. Book 1 was all written before Trespasser was released, so I suppose it's a bit AU, but it is in keeping with all pre-Trespasser lore. Book 2 is in progress.

Pretty please tell me what you think! It keeps me motivated to know that people are reading and enjoying my work!
The Beginning of After

Ahrue Lavellan walked through the Grand Hall of Skyhold making conversation with the guests and her friends. She’d won. Corypheus was dead, and the breach had been sealed. Nearly a year of constant fighting, struggling, and sacrificing had come to a head, and now it was over. Everyone looked relieved and happy, but for Ahrue, all that had happened over the past months still hung in the air like a heavy fog that wouldn’t lift. The festivities taking place around her seemed like a dream. She heard herself speak and laugh, heard her companions talk about the victory and their future plans, but the moment lacked immediacy. It could have been one of Varric’s stories: vivid, colorful, and richly elaborate, but always with that hint of the unreal. Just a story being told. The book would close, and everyone would go about their lives as before.

After dutifully doing the rounds, talking to everyone, thanking them for the part they had played in the final victory, Ahrue quietly edged her way to the door to her quarters and slipped out of the Grand Hall. Away from the frenetic buzz of activity, her body became suddenly all too physical. The weight of everything that had happened pressed against her shoulders and spine, and she felt a hollow churning in her stomach, a screaming grief at the ready in her throat. She swallowed it back, and laboriously climbed the stairs to her chamber.

As she topped the stairs, the sight of the balcony gripped her. Part of her expected to see Solas there, waiting for her to escape from the human nobles demanding her attention, as he had many times before. The sound of her footfalls approaching would make him turn, and he’d fix her with an impish smile and dancing eyes. Leaning against the banister, fingers intertwined with hers, he’d speak to her in an Elven dialect more ancient than anything she’d heard or read in all her studies of the old ways. In a breathless prelude to a kiss, they’d exchange those tender words, as they had so many times before: “Ar lath ma.”

At first he’d been cautious with her, her Dalish heritage giving him pause; her clan would not accept a flat-ear at the side of their First. It would be kinder to them both if he left. She could still feel the texture of his tunic and the lithe sinew of his arm as she held him back and asked him, for the first time, not to leave. The memory of his words slipped from her lips: “losing you would-.” On that day, he’d stayed, and his habitual caution regarding her had given way to an easy warmth. “Ar lath ma, vhenan.” In the midst of the chaos, violence, and strangeness, they’d found a home in one another.

She had never for a moment doubted his feelings for her. He’d loved her openly, which had made his leaving all the more confounding. It had ended abruptly. Even he’d looked startled by his decision as a palpable anguish overtook him that he would not permit her to ease. He’d refused to explain, and in the weeks since, she’d been unable to believe it was really over. Yes, he’d hurt her deeply, but she’d remained certain that once the breach was sealed and Corypheus defeated, Solas would come to her, ready to let her in, prepared to repair what he had hastily broken. Yet in those moments after the battle, as he’d crouched over the shattered orb, he’d been resolute in his pain, determined to carry it alone.

She looked at the trunk where she had stowed the orb fragments upon her return to Skyhold just hours earlier. Why the orb had meant so much to Solas, she didn’t know. She wondered, had the orb been salvaged, would Solas have stayed, or had he always planned to leave once the chaos had passed? Her grandfather’s warning, spoken to her in childhood, pushed heavily on her thoughts: “The flat ears are no better than their shemlen masters; they’ve forgotten the ways of the elvhen, most of all in affairs of the heart. They will lure a foolish girl to their bed with honeyed words and promises, only to leave her to her shame by sunrise.” Had she been so poorly used? A port in a
storm, as the humans phrased it? Or worse, a means to an end? Had he manipulated her in order to
get close to the orb? She pushed the thought roughly away. No. She had to believe that she was
more to him than that. What they’d shared was real. Believing anything else was unbearable.

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That night, she dreamt of the waterfall. It was just after sunset, and a slight cool breeze from the
south soothed Ahrue’s fevered skin. She entered the clearing to find a dark wolf whimpering in the
spot Solas had stood when he’d kissed her for the last time, the spot where Ahrue had once again
asked him to stay. The spot where it had ended. Hearing her approach, the wolf turned toward her,
his blue eyes flashing in the moonlight. Ahrue froze; wolves were bad omens in dreams, heralding
nightmares or foretelling an impending betrayal at the hands of a trusted friend. You’ve arrived a
little late, fen’era, she thought wryly. The wolf whined and lowered himself to the ground, his face
between his paws. Their eyes met briefly then he looked away. He was no threat.

At the sight of the wolf, the tears that Ahrue had been holding back for so long flowed freely. She
sank to the ground, burying her face in her hands as sobs wracked her small frame. Her life had
been crumbling around her since the day she’d left her clan to travel to the Conclave, and she didn’t
know how to make it right. The woman she was had been gradually replaced by the Inquisitor: a
character she had invented to achieve an end. She could not doubt that it was worth it—without her
willingness to adopt the role, the world would no doubt have been violently shaped into that dark
future she had witnessed in Redcliff—but she had never expected that the personal cost would be
so high. The world was safe, but she couldn’t help but count herself among the casualties.

In a few moments, she felt the coarse fur of the wolf against her arm. He nuzzled under her chin.
Startled, Ahrue recoiled, and the wolf whimpered and backed away, returning to his submissive
pose. She regarded the creature. Was he a figment that she had conjured to comfort her in her grief
(an odd choice of form, given the specific significance of wolves to the Dalish) or a spirit reaching
out to her in compassion? In either case, he was not an obvious danger to her. After a few slow
breaths, she sidled up to the wolf on the ground and stroked his fur as the tears continued to flow
down her cheeks and neck, and her body shook with barely audible sobs. The wolf rested his head
on her lap, whimpering softly. Ahrue wondered if the wolf, like her, was suffering some invisible
harm. For a long time, they sat there together sharing their pain and taking comfort in one another.

Hours passed. Ahrue saw the sun rising and knew that the dream would come to an end soon. The
wolf seemed to sense this too and whined as he stood up and turned to face her, their eyes inches
apart.

Ahrue smiled weakly and sighed. She reached out and stroked his head and neck. “I don’t know if
you’re a figment or a spirit, but you being here tonight… it helped a little.”

The wolf’s ears perked and he continued to stare at her steadily.

She bit her lip and stiffened as a thought occurred to her. “If… if you are a spirit, perhaps you
could pass a message for me to another dreamer.”

The wolf broke his gaze and turned his head away.

Ahrue grasped the sides of his head and turned his face back to her own. Their eyes locked.
“Please. I need him to know that—”

Ahrue woke up. Her face and pillow were damp with tears. She must have been crying in her sleep.
The dream stayed with her, but the message that she had been so intent to deliver to Solas faded quickly from her mind. It unnerved her that something that had felt so significant moments before was now completely forgotten. She thought about staying in bed, taking a potion to return her to sleep. Maybe in the fade she’d be able to recall the message, find the wolf. But it seemed pointless. If the wolf was a spirit, he was certainly not keen on playing messenger. And even if he had been willing to pass notes between them, what could she have to say that she hadn’t already said? Solas had chosen to abandon her in spite of everything they felt, everything they might have had together. She could think of nothing that would change his mind, and repeating any plea for him to stay would only hurt them both more than they already were. Underneath her worry and regret, the Vir’abelasan whispered incoherently.
Worry

Varric hadn’t slept much the night before. He’d approached the Inquisitor’s door half a dozen times trying to think of what to say, but everything he could come up with sounded like a hollow platitude. Always with an eye for a story, he’d noticed the subtle change in the Inquisitor. Ahrue’s sharp vibrancy had left her eyes. She laughed when she was supposed to, responded to her comrades with inflections that connoted interest or concern. But there was a mechanical edge to her words and actions, like one of Bianca’s wind up contraptions that kept moving, cogs setting other cogs in motion, well after the operator had stepped away.

Varric had seen this before in Hawke just after she had chased the Qunari out of Kirkwall. After the battle, the grief of the months prior had set in: Fenris’ abrupt, inexplicable departure, losing her mother, failing to save the Viscount’s son, and witnessing the death caused by the Qunari invasion. The constant demands to keep fighting had kept her going, kept her focused and present. But as soon as there was time to breathe, have a drink, and take stock, the pain had taken over, even as she put on an admirable performance of being “fine.”

The difference was, Varric more or less knew how to deal with Hawke, knew what to say to pull her, if only for a moment, out of her brooding. But the Inquisitor was still something of a puzzle to him, not to mention intimidating as hell. He wasn’t sure that anyone really knew her, except maybe Solas. But Solas hadn’t come back from the battle with Corypheus. At first, Varric had figured him for dead, but when he’d cautiously pressed Ahrue for information, she’d just said, “He’s fine. He left,” and she wouldn’t say anything more about it.

Varric knew the two of them had hit a rough patch lately. One day they had been all “vhenan” and soft smiles, and the next had been a whole lot of anguished looks and uneasy silence. He’d figured once everything had calmed down with the whole world-being-in-imminent-danger thing, they’d be fine. But Solas taking off without so much as a goodbye really poked some holes in that theory. Why Solas had left or where he’d gone was a mystery. If anyone knew, it would be the Inquisitor. Or Cole. Varric took a swig of ale at the thought of trying to wrestle a conversation with Cole into any semblance of sense.

He wished Hawke was here; she was good at saying the right thing to people. How many times had she waded into a mess to help a friend or a stranger? She knew when to act, when to tease, when to reassure, and when to just tell someone to snap out of it and stop feeling sorry for themselves. Varric? He defaulted to humor and meddling behind the scenes, pulling a string here or there to lighten a friend’s load. Neither felt entirely appropriate right now. Still, old habits. He would put out feelers for Solas with his network of contacts in the morning, even though he doubted anything would come of it. In the meantime, he drank.

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He woke up a few hours later face down at the banquet table in a puddle of his drool. Or at least he hoped it was his drool. He lifted his head with a groan, and wiped the spittle from his chin. He blinked the sleep from his eyes to find Cole sitting on the table, six inches from Varric’s face, watching him intently. “Maker!” he started. “What are you doing kid?”

Cole cocked his head. “Waiting for you to wake up.”

“Well, I’m awake now,” Varric grunted, shaking his head.

“Yes. You are.”
“And… what did you want?”

“I want to help. She is hurt, an open wound that won’t close. The memories stick because they shaped them into something real. Now it grows and the pain will grow. A hard grey seed reaching underground, spindling, spreading, strangling, chokes out the flowers and herbs. I don’t know how to make the pain better when it’s a real thing.”

Varric rubbed his head. “Kid, has anyone ever told you that you are really hard to take on a hangover?” Solas would have been able to make sense of what Cole was on about. He would have listened to Cole’s fade-speak, said, thank you, Cole, walked up to the Inquisitor, and whispered something in her ear, his lips gently brushing her cheek. Her eyes would have flashed, and a subtle smile would have softened her mouth.

“His fingertips dance across her arm and she understands. He goes on ahead. She’ll follow soon. Her skin flushes, trying to focus on what the man in the mask is saying while thoughts of cool cotton sheets and warm lips pull her away.”

Varric winced. “Easy, kid. Probably should give them their privacy.”

Cole blinked. “Solas left, Varric.”

Varric patted Cole’s foot. “I know he did, kid.”

“The bed is empty, and the pain grows, slowly, subtly, sorrows. There is no bright light to pull her back.”

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you. Sometimes people leave.”

“But he left behind his heart.”

“Very poetic,” said Varric dryly. “Listen, kid, you’d know better than me what to do here. You were there with them in Haven. And there’s that mind trick of yours. Don’t you have any idea why Chuckles left or where he went?”

Cole looked at his feet. “I knew, but now I’ve forgotten. He took the memory. I didn’t know he could.”

Varric sighed. “Of course he did.” He massaged the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. “Shit. I don’t know what to do about this. Maybe it just needs to run its course. Let time do its thing. Maybe the best thing we can do is just be here if she needs us.”

“Time will make it grow, become heavy, hard, holding. Real.”

“Yeah, you mentioned something like that.”

A groan came from under the table. “Will you two shut it?” Sera growled.

Varric chuckled weakly, “You too, Buttercup?” He looked around the hall and saw numerous guests passed out at the banquet tables. Some were starting to come to, groaning and holding their heads. One human was hastily stumbling toward the great doors. Humans and elves really should stay away from Dwarven ale; it always ends badly. “Well, hangovers aside, the Inquisitor is eventually going to come through that door,” he said, pointing. “And I’d like to have something more supportive than, ‘nothing like killing an ancient darkspawn magister to make you sleep like the stone’ ready.”
Sera dragged herself out from under the table. “Pffft. Supportive. So Pointy took off. She’ll be better off. Maybe less elfy without him all ‘ancient blah blah.’ And ‘vhenan, vhenan, vhe-fuck’n-nan.’ Like, we get it, you’re an elf, and you like her, and you’re an elf. Now, shut it.” She shakily pulled herself onto the bench across the table from Varric. “You think what? She’s gonna moon over him forever? She can take on Coryphyfish but can’t handle some broody elf walking out on her? Whatever. She’s better than that. Better than him.”

Varric shrugged. “Maybe. But I’ve known my share of heroes, and the big heroes, the ones who make a habit of throwing themselves into danger, the ones who fight their way back again and again, they need people. And not just to watch their back and draw fire. They need to feel connected. Otherwise, either they stop throwing themselves into danger, because, what’s the point, or worse, they stop fighting their way back. Heroes need people to die for and people to live for. And because heroes need people, need those connections, that’s where they’re most vulnerable. I’ve known folks who could take down a dragon without breaking a sweat completely crumble after losing someone they loved.”

“First the father, then the sister, then the brother, then the mother. Too much. Now she holds tight, tenacious, terrified. No one else will slip away. But they will. They always do,” said Cole.

“Yup, kid,” said Varric. “They sure do.”

Sera frowned and stared at the table in quiet thought for a few moments. “Well, she’s got us, doesn’t she?”

Varric nodded. “Sure, Buttercup. But Solas was the one she really depended on. I’m not sure that any of us could fill his shoes.”

“Some of us might try if she wasn’t so elfy,” Sera grumped.

“Solas doesn’t wear shoes,” said Cole.

Varric smiled. “Good one, kid. Keep practicing those knock-knock jokes.”

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Through closed eyes, Dorian felt the sun coming through the window, assaulting his face and sending a stabbing pain through the back of his neck. He pulled the blanket over his head and buried his face into Iron Bull’s arm. Bull pulled him closer, drew back the blanket, and nibbled not-quite-gently on Dorian’s earlobe. Dorian swatted him away growling, “Vishante Kafaas!”

“Mmmm. You know I love it when you talk dirty.”

“I have a headache. Go bother someone else. I’m sure there’s some stable boy wondering about with nothing better to do.” He pressed his palms to his eyes. “I’m going to sleep for at least three more days.”


“Actually, good luck finding anyone who doesn’t have a headache this morning. After that party last night, I expect half of Thedas is going to spend today cursing the sun and any horned lummoxes stomping about.”

Iron Bull sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing his neck. “I bet the Inquisitor doesn’t have a headache.”

Dorian sat up abruptly. “The Inquisitor? I doubt you’re her type. But if you want to be set on fire
for your efforts, be my guest.”

Bull laughed, “By her or you?”

“Both.”

Bull tousled Dorian’s hair, chuckling. “Ah, Kadan. I wouldn’t.” He shrugged. “Elves are too
delicate, and everyone would get mad at me if I broke the Inquisitor.”

“To put it mildly. Inquisitors are rare to come by and expensive to replace. You’d likely incur a
hefty fine.”

“True. But seriously, did you notice how early the boss left the party?”

“Hmm? Yes, I suspect she was a bit tired after killing a dragon and Corypheus in addition to
marching the two day journey to and from the breach. Is there a problem?”

“Maybe. Did you talk to her last night?”

“Yes, and she seemed, Maker save us, tired.”

“It was more than that.”

“Well, she was recently jilted by her lover. That might have something to do with it. He didn’t
come back with the others, so I gather it really is finished between them.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

Dorian’s eyes brightened and he grinned devilishly, “Really? Do you have some titillating gossip
to share? What have you heard?”

“Ben-hassrath training. I could see it in his body language.”

Dorian flopped backwards onto the mattress and waved a dismissive hand at Bull. “Ah. That.”

“Solas had something hanging over him, something big, probably dangerous.”

“Ah yes,” said Dorian with a roll of his eyes. “And the Inquisitor, dainty flower that she is, could
not possibly have handled something dangerous. She probably would have went into hysterics, or
fainted, or dropped things, important things. Understandable that he would leave her behind.”

“He’ll be back.”

“Well, I’m not sure she knows that. I’m not sure even he knows that. So I think she’s a bit broken
up over the whole thing.” Dorian pulled the blanket back up to his chin and closed his eyes. “He’s
a fool who doesn’t deserve her, if you ask me. If he does come back, I hope she has the good sense
to not accept him. Anyway, mystery solved: the Inquisitor is tired and pining for an undeserving
irrumatori. I think we’ll all feel better after a few days.”

“Maybe.”

Tired as he was, Dorian could not fall back to sleep. Despite his efforts to dismiss Bull’s intuition,
Dorian was, in fact, worried about the Inquisitor. Bull was right, she hadn’t been quite herself at
the party. And her distant expression went beyond exhaustion and romantic frustration. She was a
private person and had said little to him about what had transpired between her and Solas, but he’d
read that the Dalish didn’t take romance lightly. It was their custom to mate for life. Surely Solas
knew that, which made his departure all the crueler. If he hadn’t intended to stick around, he
should have made that clear from the start. His skin bristled at the thought of his friend being taken
advantage of like some pitiable bar wench, tossed aside by a lecherous rogue. She was the Herald
of Andraste, the leader of the Inquisition, and here she was, unraveled by a man who’d used her for
his own gratification and then broke her heart. Irrumatori. Fade take him.
Dream

Ordinarily Solas spent his sleeping hours exploring the dreams of others, the memories, hopes, and fears that clung to a place, conversing with the spirits that were drawn there. But now, his dreams pulled him repeatedly to Ahrue, memories of their time together.

He dreamed of a day nearly a year ago: a cold winter morning, just after the breach had opened. A knock on the door had jolted Solas out of a deep sleep. He’d been searching the fade for answers. He had to put this right. But the spirits of the fade had been driven away by the opening of the breach, and he could find no sign of where Corypheus had gone. His mind raced with unanswered questions. Had Corypheus succeeded in entering the fade? Had the ritual gone wrong? Where was the orb now?

With the loud rapping on the door, the fade had quickly evaporated. He was in his quarters in Haven. The cold mountain air stung his cheeks, and the acrid smell of burning elfroot from the Alchemist’s hut next door filled his nose. Without waiting for a response, Cassandra threw open the door. “Get up. We have a task for you.”

Despite the domineering character of her command, Solas had been waiting to have his skills put to use and was glad to hear that those in charge were relaxing in their suspicion of him. Solas shook off his irritation at Cassandra’s tone as best he could and gestured for her to lead the way.

“She lives?” he asked, hoping that Cassandra was not escorting him to a corpse.

“The prisoner remains unconscious but alive,” said Cassandra, with gruff coldness.

“Heard that the surviving elf was unconscious.”

Solas narrowed his eyes. “For what purpose?”

“We believe she was responsible for the Divine’s death.”

Human justice. They might very well execute the woman while she sleeps. “You have determined her guilt before she has had a chance to speak for herself? Based on what? That she is an elf? Or that she survived the destruction of the temple?”

“There is more.”

They entered the Chantry and headed toward the undercroft where the dungeon was located. Naturally. How else would the world be safe from an unconscious elf if she wasn’t locked in a cell?

“She has a strange mark of her hand,” Cassandra continued. “When the rift pulses, the mark glows.
The two are undoubtedly connected."

The anchor. It must be. “Curious. But hardly damning evidence. She may have been pulled into the fade with other victims. Not all the victims have been accounted for, yes? Perhaps the experience marked her: a wound from the ordeal. I hope that you’ll wait to prepare the gallows until after she has been questioned.”

Cassandra whirled on him, jabbing an index finger into his chest. “Tread carefully, apostate. You are not above suspicion. As long as you cooperate, your presence will be tolerated, but should you cease to be useful…”

Solas stepped back to break their contact. “I understand, Seeker. I only mean to bring to light scenarios you may not have considered in your haste to find the responsible party.”

She pushed him roughly forward. “You claim to be an expert on the fade. Prove it. I want answers.”

Cassandra led him down the stairs and into the dungeon where five guards stood at the ready. On the ground, a young Elven woman was slumped forward, unconscious, head hanging limply. She was held in a sitting posture by the shackles that bound her. “Is this really necessary?” he snapped, gesturing toward the chains.

Cassandra put her hands on her hips and widened her stance. “We do not know what danger she poses. The chains stay.”

Solas shook his head and knelt in front of the prisoner. Her breath was shallow and labored, and her skin was drained of color. He lifted her face gently. The branching, arboreal vallaslin of Mythal was tattooed across her forehead and around her eyes. Dalish. He could sense the magic in her, pulling at the fade and buzzing through him like the vibrating hum of low music.

He turned to Cassandra. “Do you know who she is?”

“Very little. She had false identification. Her papers identify her as a mage from the Circle in Ostwick named Danalla Haffan. But Leliana has confirmed that Haffan was killed by a Templar near Markham before she could reach the Temple of Sacred Ashes. The prisoner is likely a rebel apostate who stole Haffan’s identity in order to get close to the Divine.”

“She is Dalish. She may have been sent to the Temple by her Keeper to observe the proceedings. The conflict between mages and Templars affect any who possess magic. Naturally, the Dalish would have a vested interest in the outcome. But they would certainly not want to see the conflict escalate. They would have no reason to murder the Divine.”

“You are not here to exonerate her,” growled Cassandra. “Focus on the mark.”

Suddenly the prisoner’s left hand erupted in a burst of crackling green light, making Solas jump and the prisoner groan. He grasped her hand. The anchor. But how did she have it? Corypheus had cast Solas aside—aggressively so—intent on using the anchor himself. He would not have willingly given the power to anyone. Something must have gone wrong. Corypheus had failed. The corner of Solas’ mouth twisted in a half-grin. At least there was that.

Perhaps he could use the anchor to find the orb, fix his mistake. With enough power, the anchor could be used to close the breach, but he doubted that this mortal could manage such a feat. It was why he had gone to Corypheus in the first place; no mortal mage, not even Solas himself, could channel the power necessary to control the anchor. Besides, it was unlikely that she would ever
wake up to even make the attempt. She was a victim, being dragged along, helplessly tethered to the orb and the surging breach. Again the mark flashed, and the woman cried out in her sleep. Poor child. As the breach grew so too would the mark. Eventually it would kill her. His fault.

“Solas. What do you make of it?”

Solas turned toward the Seeker, still holding the prisoner’s hand in his own, feeling the pulse of the mark thrum beneath his fingers. “I… need time. The mark is magic, but its origin is unknown to me. I can try some spells, search the fade.”

Cassandra scowled. “We do not have time for this. We need answers now. Already the rumors are spreading that we have the Divine’s murderer in captivity. Soon they will be calling for her execution.”

Solas laughed bitterly. “Of course they will; she is an Elven apostate, a symbol of all they hate and fear. If a human had survived the explosion, they would no doubt be calling it a miracle, claiming that she was shielded by the marker himself. But an elf--”

“They are frightened. As the breach grows, they become more terrified. There are fights in the streets, riots. Executing the one who caused this would restore some order, give them faith that the Inquisition--”

“In the short term. But if she dies we might lose our only opportunity to close the breach.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Regardless of whether she is guilty or innocent, you were right, the mark is undoubtedly connected to the breach. If you give me time to study the mark, I might be able to discover a way to manipulate the breach, seal it.”

The prisoner cried out as the anchor sparked again. He closed his eyes against the guilt that roiled in him. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.

“She will need a healer,” he said firmly. “I believe the mark is killing her. And if I am to find any answers, I will need her alive. Preferably awake.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrowed. “You are very protective of her, apostate. Some might call it tenderness. You immediately jumped to her defense, argued for her innocence, and now you want us to spend our meager resources caring for her. Do you really know so little of the mark, or are you bargaining for time, I wonder? Tell me again why you were so close to Haven during the Conclave? Your presence was very convenient.”

“I am as desperate for answers as you are, Seeker,” Solas said wearily. “Do you have so many options that you are willing to squander this opportunity for knowledge on the basis of unfounded suspicion and a thirst for vengeance? Whether or not you trust me, surely you can recognize that the prisoner is more useful to you alive than dead!”

Cassandra stared at Solas steadily, jaw tensed. “Very well. She will be tended to,” she said through gritted teeth. “But you will be watched every moment you are with her. And if I find out that you have been lying to me or stalling for time, I will kill you.” Cassandra lowered her voice to give some instructions to a nearby guard before stomping out of the cell and up the stairs.

Solas returned his attention to the prisoner. I will do all I can, Da’len, he told her silently.

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In another dream, it was three days later. Solas fought by the durgen’len’s side as demons poured out of the rift. His second attempt to seal it had failed, and his efforts to extract the anchor from the prisoner’s hand had proved fruitless, as had his attempts to use the anchor to locate the orb. It was time for him to leave, find some distant corner of the world where he could search for answers away from the immediate danger posed by the expanding breach and Cassandra’s temper. He wished there was some way he could take the prisoner with him; she was still his best hope of putting things right. But she was watched too closely, and, if Corypheus still lived, he would undoubtedly come after her. Solas might not be lucky enough to survive a second encounter with the monster.

“Hey, Chuckles!” Varric shouted over the din. “You keeping score? That’s three for me!”

“Sorry,” Solas shouted back. “I was focusing on not dying.”

“Then you might be in luck, because it looks like we’ve got company!” Varric pointed over Solas’ shoulder before dispatching his forth demon with an arrow through its head.

Solas turned. Cassandra and the prisoner were running toward them, weapons in hand. The prisoner tensed her jaw as the mark on her hand crackled angrily in such close proximity to a rift. Despite her obvious pain, she lifted her staff and slammed it to the ground, summoning a branching bolt of energy that turned two demons to dust. She then ran to Solas’ back, positioning herself between him and two demons that were making an attempt to flank him. She lifted her arms and thrust them forward, sending the demons stumbling backward with an impressive telekinetic wave. Cassandra quickly finished them off with a clean strike across their necks.

Solas looked at the rift, crackling with green power, and the prisoner’s hand, sparking in kind. There was a chance. He grabbed her hand and shouted, “Quickly! Before more come through!” He thrust her hand upward toward the rift and channeled his energy through her. As their power connected, Solas could sense resonances between them. The same old song echoed in the foundations of their beings. A shared pleasure, grief, and longing, a home forever sought but never found. He had felt it within her while she slept, an echo whispering beneath the nightmares. But now she drew her power from that old song, pulling it from the shadows to her core. He felt her power surge and focus through the anchor, drawing threads of the fade through the rift to her hand where they gathered at her fingertips, twining together like the fibers of a rope. Then, as if by instinct, she pulled, and the rift cinched shut, sutured by her indomitable focus. A warmth washed over Solas. A mortal closed the rift. It seemed impossible.

She yanked her hand from his grasp. “What did you do?”

He noticed that she was beautiful, not for the first time. But now, still awash with her power and the realization that perhaps they were not completely doomed after all, that beauty felt suddenly significant. It went beyond the physical details of her form, the smoothness of her skin, or the brightness of her eyes. It was as though everything became more real just by having her there. Not the inflexible leaden reality reified by Templars and Dwarves. No, she emanated a vividness, a vitality, a depth, like wiping the dust from an intricate vase. Looking at her now, he felt the whole world change.

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He dreamt of their conversations, the times they’d kissed, the first time he’d told her he loved her, the times they’d made love, the times he’d almost lost her to wounds and the Vir’abelasan, and the night he’d ended it. To that moment he returned again and again. It had almost gone differently. He’d thought to pledge himself to her in the Dalish fashion. She had broken with tradition by being with him, and now he’d planned to honor tradition for her sake. At least as far as he was able, that
is; her keeper would not likely bless a bonding between her First and a flat-ear, and their relationship had already progressed outside the traditional order of things. Ahrue had often strayed from the strict customs of the Dalish in her time with the Inquisition, and she had gradually become less attached to the inflexibility of their ways. But being Dalish was still an important part of who she was, it was what made her the remarkable woman she’d become. Whatever Solas’ feelings for the Dalish, he had learned to respect and honor the subtle and beautiful ways that Dalish values, training, and customs informed Ahrue’s actions and beliefs. He could think of no better way to honor that part of her than by taking part in one of the most cherished Dalish traditions. So he’d given her a gift that demonstrated his specific contribution to her life, as was the custom among Dalish men when they’d announce their desire to be bonded to another. Hunters would usually make a gift of fur and meat, healers would present braids of dried herbs. Solas had made a gift of his knowledge and magic, revealing the true meaning of the vallaslin and offering to remove it. She’d accepted his knowledge as fact, acknowledged that history as a part of her, and declined the removal, a choice that had inspired a surge of deep admiration and affection in him. She’d explained to him why the vallaslin mattered to her: when she looked in a mirror, she didn’t see the mark of Mythal, she saw the threads of blood that connected her both to a fragmentary past and a people that, for all their flaws, had shared her struggles and her joys all her life and were still a part of her. Separated from them as she was now, probably permanently, she needed the connection represented by the vallaslin more than ever. She’d been concerned that he wouldn’t understand. In fact, he’d understood her better than she’d ever know. He’d interrupted her worries. “Stop. You are perfect exactly as you are.”

They’d kissed deeply. In all his long years, he had never loved another as he’d loved her in that moment. All that she was spoke to him, and even with as little as she knew about his past, she seemed to intuitively understand him and never required more detail about his life than he was willing to give. As much as he was filled with dread at the thought of her being under a geas to Mythal, now that Ahrue had used the Vir’abelasan he felt their sameness more strongly than ever. It would be many years, if ever, before she could fully understand the whispers of the well, but that knowledge was a part of her now. A terrible burden he knew well. Something they could share. The kiss had broken, and their eyes had met. He’d felt her admiration and trust, known she would accept him, and he’d felt ashamed. The lies and half-truths he had told her, the ways he had used her, was still using her, to find the orb flooded his thoughts as she gazed into his eyes. He’d wanted to tell her. It had taken every ounce of his self-control not to tell her. But he could not risk her response, not until he had the orb.

In that moment, he’d known himself to be undeserving. His planned speech about love and devotion evaporated on his lips, and he’d turned away. Until he could come to her in honesty, give her the chance to accept him or reject him on those terms, she could not be his.

-x-

On the third night after the breach was sealed, he watched the scene at the waterfall play out again from the shadows in his wolf form. He watched them enter hand-in-hand. He watched himself express his deep affection and share his gift of the “truth” (the irony made his throat tighten). He watched as she rejected his offer to remove the vallaslin. He watched their last embrace, saw the love and anticipation on both their faces. And he watched the mood shift. He watched them argue. He watched her leave, hurt and angry. He watched himself sink to the ground, overcome by all he had done and all he had lost. After a while, the figment of himself got up and staggered away, resigned to his solitary path.

Solas stepped out of the shadows and sat in the spot his dream-self had just occupied. He would never forgive himself for hurting her. His only consolation was that he had also hurt himself. In all his life, only one pain surpassed it. He whimpered, wishing he could see her, wishing he could make things right. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.
A noise nearby startled him. He turned to see her there. At first he thought it was part of the memory, that she had come back for him that night after he had left. But no. This was not the remnants of an unseen memory, this was her spirit walking the fade while she slumbered in her bed in Skyhold. Had he summoned her here without knowing it, or had she sought him out? He wanted to show her his familiar form, wanted to reach out to her, take her in his arms. But it would be unfair to her. She deserved to heal and move on with her life, as much as the thought of her moving on cut him to the quick.

She saw him and froze. He was still in his wolf form, and the Dalish often associated wolves with nightmares, betrayal, and death. As practical as she was in her waking hours, dreams did not cater to practicality; she would understandably see a wolf as an unwelcome vanguard of a restless night. He took a submissive posture to put her at ease, but as her fear lessened, it was replaced by grief. She sank to the ground, sobbing, almost screaming.

Vhenan, he almost called out. He’d seen her cry before, seen her eyes well up when deeply moved or hurt, and a stray tear had escaped once or twice when she was badly wounded, but she had never, in his experience, wept with such force, such palpable agony. The sight left him breathless. Her pain pulled at him. He wished he had Cole’s gift for healing. For all Solas’ compassion, he was powerless to eliminate her pain or make her forget the cruel role he had played in her life. What he had done to Cole before his departure was not quite making him forget. Rather, he had set up barriers that made Cole lose focus when he tried to access particular memories of Solas. It was effective on a spirit, but couldn’t work on a mortal. Mortal emotions and memories were too physical; their flesh remembered what the mind forgot and the lost memory would eventually reassert itself through the body, a process that could prove traumatic. Cole’s gift was unique. He could shape memory to give the body and mind a different perception of an event. This was outside the scope of Solas’ limited ability. But then, even if Solas had the power to make Ahrue forget him, would he have the strength of will to use it? He doubted it; despite the way things had ended, what they had felt for one another—still felt for one another—mattered.

But there are other ways to heal pain. He remembered Cole stirring honey into Leliana’s wine, burning turnips to remind a dying man of home. He thought of Ahrue at Skyhold, alone even among friends. Despite all she had done and the role she had played in the religious and political lives of Andrastians throughout Thedas, she was Dalish. Being the Herald and the Inquisitor was a calculated performance to her. She knew that they would not readily accept a Dalish elf or a mage as their Inquisitor, so she downplayed the most objectionable aspects of her identity, avoided uncomfortable topics, and did her best to pass as one of them. Alone with Solas, the performance would break. They would speak Elvish and use magic freely, and her stoic persona would give way to emotions in all their many colors. She’d taught him Dalish dances for joy, sorrow, love, fear, and courage that contained within them echoes of the dances from his own youth. She would laugh freely and smile with a vibrant light that was unique to her. More than once he’d kissed away tears of grief, frustration, and homesickness. The Dalish were a people of deep feelings, but humans and dwarves found such displays distasteful, especially in a leader. Her friends in the Inquisition would care that she was in pain, but they would be unnerved by it, shaken. Some would even be repelled. He imagined Vivienne telling Ahrue that such displays were unbecoming an individual in her position. Perhaps Ahrue was crying in her dreams because, without him there, she did not feel free to do so anywhere else.

Solas approached Ahrue. Perhaps the greatest act of compassion he could give her would be to see her pain and accept it, as he had in the past, as she had done for him. He could not conceal his own feelings in deference to hers, but maybe that too would be a comfort. He could think of nothing more indicative of love and care than sharing vulnerabilities, nothing more comforting than seeing a pain within yourself mirrored in and understood by another. With a cautious start, they passed the night together in quiet company. And when the sun began to rise, he was sorry to feel the dream
coming to an end. He stood and faced her, hoping that on some level she could sense that it was him. But he saw no sign of recognition in her eyes.

In their final moments together, she spoke to him, told him he had helped, and asked him to take a message to another dreamer. He recoiled. He could not bear to hear her ask him to return, ask him for answers, not while he was still bound by centuries old obligation. But she was forceful, desperate to have her message heard. He resolved to listen; he owed her that, painful as it might be.

The dream faded before she could say what she needed him to know. He woke gasping. “Ir abelas, ma sa’lath,” he said breathlessly into the early morning mist, and he wept.
When Ahrue finally came out of her chambers, she waved a greeting in the direction of her comrades and walked past them without a word, out into the courtyard. She knew that staying in her chambers all day would have generated rumors about her fitness of mind and body, so she’d reluctantly decided to make a quick appearance around the grounds of Skyhold. She wasn’t in the mood to talk, and she hoped that if she looked purposeful, no one would give her lack of social engagement a second thought. No such luck. She turned at the patter of Varric jogging to catch up.

“Hey, Inquisitor!” he said a little too enthusiastically. “That was… some party last night.”

She smiled. “Yes, we earned it. It was good to see everyone relaxed for a change.”

Varric fell into step beside her. “Yeah. You… ah… you ducked out pretty early. Missed an epic game of diamond back.”

“Really? I hope Cullen managed to keep his trousers this time! I’ll have to catch the next one,” she said, trying to match Varric’s energy.

“Right.” He ran his hand through his hair, glancing around awkwardly, as if hoping for inspiration. Ahrue was done with the small talk. She picked up her pace, hoping that he would fall behind, but he kept pace beside her. Ahrue stopped and turned to face Varric. “Is there something you needed,” she asked with a slight edge to her voice.

“Ah, no. I…” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Shit. I really was hoping this wouldn’t be awkward.”

She folded her arms and furrowed her brow. “What wouldn’t be awkward? Spit it out.”

He nodded in the direction of a secluded corner, where they relocated to pick up their conversation in private. She braced herself as Varric started his rehearsed speech. “Look, winning a big fight, a lot of people assume that afterward the heroes who make it happen get to bask in the glory, have a big party, a well-deserved rest, maybe a parade, and then they’ll live their lives, have their happily ever after. It’s what people want from their heroes, what they expect. But, that’s not really how it works, because getting to the end, it takes its toll. Things… people…get lost along the way.”

Ahrue looked at the ground and closed her eyes. Damned insightful dwarf had cut to the heart of it. And his naming it hurt. She’d lost a lot, even before Solas had left: she’d left her family and clan, her entire vision of her life had been obliterated, her culture and identity chipped away at until they were unrecognizable, and more lives had been lost than she could bear to think about. And the Vir’abelasan, it’s whispers weighing more heavily on her by the day. The last few months had been a storm of chaos and heartache. But through all of it, Solas had been the ground beneath her. Now that he was gone, the storm was overwhelming, and the damage it had caused was more than she could face. She felt Varric’s hand on her arm.

“Inquisitor. Ahrue. You don’t have to jump to the happy-ever-after. You skip as many parties, parades, and games of diamond back as you want.”

She laughed in spite of herself, tears closer to the surface than she would have liked.

“Just know that, well, you’re always invited, and you’ve got a lot of people who care about you. Anything you want or need, we’re all here for you. You should let us help. Some of us may not be
good at it, but we’ll all try.”

Ahrue smiled and opened her tear filled eyes. “Varric, you are plenty good at it.”

Varric snorted, “You thought I meant me? No, I was talking about Cassandra! She’s about as capable of sensitivity as an angry bronto in a heat wave. Me? I’m a great listener. I’ll even promise not to write it all down, if you think it will hurt your image. But I’m telling you, in the long run, people like their heroes to be… well… people. Paragons don’t sell books.”

He was trying, but he didn’t really understand. He couldn’t. “Ma serannas, Varric.” She smiled softly. “You are kind to worry. But, with time, I will be alright,” she said, not quite believing it herself. She started to walk away.

Varric called out, “Yeah. The thing is, the kid says you won’t.”

She turned. “What?”

Varric shrugged. “It may be nothing; Maker knows I can’t make sense of half of what he says. But Cole’s pretty firm on the point that you’ll get worse over time. Something about the pain becoming more real and permanent.”

Cole’s prediction was unnerving. He could see things in people that they couldn’t recognize in themselves. Was he able to see the future or was he just expressing Ahrue’s own sense of hopelessness? Ahrue snorted. “Well if anything is going to make me feel better, it’s the prospect that I never will.”

“Ah, yeah… I didn’t think that one through.”

They were quiet for a few moments. Ahrue thought of the sentinels at the Vir’abelasan, of Abelas, how long they had stood vigil in service to a dead god. Well, not so dead, as it turned out, but a quiet god, in any case. Was perpetual sorrow the destiny of all those bound to Mythal? Had she ensured her endless grief when she drank from the well? The whispers of the ancient elves grew unbearably loud, and she pushed them forcefully back.

Ahrue took a deep breath. “Varric, maybe it will get worse. Maybe I’ll never know another moment without sorrow.”

Varric fidgeted. The conversation was clearly not going as he’d planned. “Okay, this is getting dark.”

“And if that’s the case, maybe time will help me learn to endure the pain, to live with it as a part of me.”

Varric put his hands in his pockets. “I gather Elves are good at that. I have a friend who’s an expert brooder. You should meet; he can give you lessons.”

Ahrue crouched in front of Varric to be at eye level. “There is an elven virtue called ‘suledin.’ It means ‘endurance in the face of loss.’ It is the acknowledgment that grief and sorrow are a part of life and cannot always be triumphed over. Sometimes learning to live with pain is the best we can manage,” she took his hands in hers. “But, thankfully, there are things to live for besides love, and there is much more to life than happiness.”

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A messenger bird swooped into the rookery and landed on the desk beside Leliana’s hand. The
bird held out her left leg, a small scroll fastened to it with black twine and red wax. Leliana smiled, and stroked the bird’s ruffled feathers. “Ah, Lady Grimle! Do you have a present for me?”

Lady Grimle clicked her beak at Leliana.

Leliana reached into a pouch on her belt and pulled out a plump red berry with her thumb and forefinger. “I will make you a trade,” she said in a sing-song tone.

The bird bobbed her head.

Leliana gave the bird the berry and gently removed the message from her leg. She broke the wax seal and unfurled the scroll as the bird took off for her nest. The message was from Agent Tamalen. She had been scouting to the south west of Val Royeaux. Leliana hadn’t heard from her in several days, and she hoped the scout had a lead. She stared intently at the message, reading and rereading the content before swiping it to the floor with the back of her hand. Leliana leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. It was rare for her spy network to prove so utterly useless. For one week they had been searching for signs of Solas, and nothing. It was not surprising, but utterly disappointing just the same.

Cullen and Josephine had told her to abandon the search. Solas had done his part for the Inquisition; it was his choice (and entirely not the Inquisition’s concern) if he wanted to leave. Cullen believed that Solas—always ill at ease around humans and the chantry—had left to find a place more to his tastes. Josephine was convinced his departure was motivated by a broken heart. But Leliana had spent too much of her life in the business of secrets and shadows to accept his departure as they did. Where Cullen saw discomfort, Leliana saw duplicity. Where Josephine saw heartbreak, Leliana saw betrayal.

Solas had been an asset to the Inquisition, but Leliana had long been unsettled by how little she knew of him. She had detailed information on every member of the Inquisition. Cole had left a paper trail leading up to his time with the Inquisition, even though few remembered actually meeting him. Thom Rainier’s background was spotty, but still the dots were there for Leliana to connect.

But Solas was a mystery. His descriptions of his past were vague and cryptic, his accent impossible to place, and his wealth of knowledge regarding the fade and the breach suspiciously convenient. The Inquisition had needed exactly his expertise, and there he was, happy to serve. Suspicious. But as the Inquisition expanded and the threat posed by Corypheus had grown, Leliana’s attention had been drawn to more obvious and immediate dangers. As she’d once accepted Zevran and Morrigan as allies against her better judgment, she’d decided to accept Solas. Whatever his personal goals, he’d acted as a loyal member of the Inquisition, and they could not have defeated Corypheus nor sealed the breach without his assistance.

It was clear to her now that Solas had sought the orb from the beginning. She had believed that he’d truly cared for the Herald, but now she saw their dalliance as a means to an end. Calculated and cruel. He’d undoubtedly known that the anchor would eventually lead him to the orb, and keeping the Herald close had served his purpose. Had the orb not been destroyed, the Herald would have trusted him to study it without oversight. Leliana thanked the Maker that the relic had shattered. Otherwise she might not have seen what Solas intended until it was too late. As it was, she feared what dark pursuits he now chased.

The Herald was too blinded by love to see what threat Solas might pose in the future. If he returned, Ahrue would be easily manipulated by him again. Leliana needed to guard against that, but with no word concerning Solas’ past, present, or future plans, she had no recourse to persuade the Herald against him. The only information she had was the name of Solas’ home town (or so
he’d claimed), a village to the north of the Free Marches that, as Solas had said, was “too small and insignificant a place to be found on any map.” Indeed, the cartographers she’d set to task finding the village’s location had turned up nothing so far save a ruin by the same name that had been uninhabited for hundreds of years, if not longer.

Leliana was at a loss. The best she could do was to keep a close watch over the Herald and pray that Solas not attempt to take advantage of her again. Leliana’s eyes narrowed and her nostril’s flared. She would not see Ahrue used by Solas as Marjolaine had used Leliana for her own selfish purposes so many years ago.
Beads in the Storm

Ahrue sat cross-legged on the ground in the garden, watching the bright blue sky shift to orange. She took a deep breath, her nostrils filling with the cloying scent of embrium and the bitter fragrance of spindle weed. Her face relaxed and eyes softened as she exhaled slowly. Two weeks had passed since they had defeated Corypheus. The excitement of victory had died down some, and Skyhold felt almost peaceful.

Many who had joined the Inquisition to help restore peace or order had started to return to their homes. Cassandra and Vivienne had left for Val Royeaux, and Leliana would soon follow. The three front runners for the seat of the Divine. Ahrue had been asked to make a nomination, and the thought made her queasy. A Dalish elf directing the course of Shemlen religious life? Had she become so removed from her roots that the Chantry had forgotten she was not one of them? She’d refused to take part. Let the humans fuss over their own mythology. While some still called her the Herald of Andraste, Ahrue had remained resolute that the Maker had played no part in her life for good or ill.

More and more she had begun to feel out of place in the Inquisition. While once she had felt a sense of victory and possibility for her people when the Shemlen obeyed her commands and scrambled for her approval, now it made her bristle. True, they had elevated her to a station of great power and respect, but when no one knew she was watching, she would witness humans barking slurs at the elven servants who brought them their tea. In their minds, the Inquisitor was an exceptional figure that all elves should aspire to. The humans took her position as evidence of their fair-mindedness, and they congratulated themselves for being impressed by her: a testament to their ability to see beyond her pointed ears. The pointed ears of her fellow elves, however, did not escape their contempt. What were the conditions an elf must meet in order to be entitled to their respect? As the Inquisitor, Ahrue had cultivated a performance of human respectability because she’d known that the Inquisition depended on it. The humans would never accept, as Sera put it, an “elfy” elf. So she’d postured and play acted and bit her tongue far more than she’d been accustomed to. Now, behaving and dressing in ways that the humans found agreeable felt like a slow monstering of herself.

Cole was the only one who could understand. “Taking the shape that others make for you turns spirits into demons,” he’d said a few days before while they’d walked the battlements together.

She’d nodded. “Like Solas’ friend.” She’d remembered the spirit of Wisdom twisted into a monstrous Pride demon by the ignorant humans who had summoned and bound it.

“And like what I used to be. I won’t become that again. You shouldn’t either.”

“So, what shape do I take instead?” She’d asked. “Do I go back to the Dalish? I’m the First; I’m expected to return.”

Cole had looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. “No, that isn’t your shape either. Burgeoning, blossoming, becoming. You can’t be kept.”

Ahrue had smiled sadly, knowing it was true. The experiences she’d had since she’d been pulled into the breach had changed her. She couldn’t just step back into her old life and expect to fit any better there than she did at Skyhold. Whatever shape she was taking, it wasn’t a familiar one.

She’d felt a dizzying rush as the whispers of the well had pulled her away from the moment, and the ground had seemed to fall away. Cole had grabbed her arm to steady her, and she’d regained
herself by focusing on the supporting contact of his hand under her elbow. “I’m sorry it hurts,” he’d said. “I wish I could make it stop.”

“It’s happening more often,” she’d said, wincing against the throbbing behind her eyes.

“Yes. Burgeoning, blossoming, it’s becoming more real.”

“I wish ‘more real’ meant ‘clearer.’ I have all this power within me, and I don’t know what to do with it. What good is the well if I can’t understand it?”

He’d cocked his head to the side. “Foot catches a stone, the jar tips, clay beads scatter into the dirt. Arms crowded with blankets, dried in the summer wind. She sighs. Leaves the beads to the storm.”

She’d caught Cole’s reference to an old memory from her childhood: rain had started to sprinkle, and Navalin had asked Ahrue to carry the freshly cleaned and dried blankets and some sun-dried beads to the Hahren’s aravel before the storm hit. She’d rested the jar of beads on top of the blankets so she could get everything back to camp in one trip. On the way down the hill to the aravel, she’d tripped on a stone jutting out of the path, and the jar had rolled off of the blankets, sending the freshly dried beads into the dirt. Without a clean surface to set the blankets on, she’d had to leave the beads behind to be ruined by the rain.

“You’re saying I’m taking on too much?” she’d asked Cole.

“If you’d put down the blankets, you could have gathered the beads.”

Cole’s words had stuck with Ahrue. Was it time to step away from the Inquisition? And go where? She’d always thought that leaving the Inquisition would mean returning to her clan. But Cole was right, she couldn’t see herself fitting in that life any more.

The thought of finding a place for herself that was neither clan nor Inquisition terrified her. Becoming Inquisitor had been difficult, but she’d had advisors and friends guiding her through the process. If she left the Inquisition, she would be starting over without a guide to help her. She would be wandering aimless, lost from the moment she set out. She shuddered. What Cole had said on the battlements suggested that Ahrue wouldn’t be able to find a new path until she’d let go of the one she was on; she couldn’t pick up the beads until she’d set down the blankets. Easier said than done.

What she needed desperately was clarity of thought and some sense of certainty about her decision to stay or go. Being stuck in between was taking its toll. She had barely slept over the past two weeks, and her body ached and temper seethed with exhaustion and frustration. The knot of fear that gripped her stomach made it difficult to keep down anything but a few bites of the blandest of foods, which didn’t help with the dizziness that ensued every time the Vir’abelasan asserted itself. She felt as though she was slowly wasting into nothingness, a stone gradually worn away by the sand blowing in the desert wind.

Ahrue rolled her shoulders and head back and forth to release the tension that had been building up and settled into a relaxed, comfortable pose, her legs folded beneath her and her hands resting palms-up on her thighs. She directed her focus to her breath, feeling the way her ribs expanded and contracted, the way the cool air heated as she drew it through her nose, into her chest, and out again. The Inquisition, the Dalish, the humans, her fear of what lay ahead faded into the background. She noticed the sounds of a Mabari barking in the courtyard and the tension in her spine, and she let them pass like wisps in the wind.

But as the sounds of the garden and the stubborn pain in her lower back faded from her attention,
the whispers of the well came into focus, pulling her from her momentary calm as her pulse quickened and her breath became fast and shallow. The air felt suddenly thin and muggy, and the walls of the garden pressed in on her. She tried to get up, to get out of the garden quickly, but a wave of dizziness and her quickly narrowing field of vision made her stumble back to the ground.

She had a distant sensation of someone touching her back and saying her name. She managed to gasp, “I can’t… make it stop…” before everything went dark.

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Dorian had been reading a dreadful book of trite Orlesian love sonnets in the garden gazebo when he heard heavy breathing and struggling coming from the other side of a patch of crystal grace. He jumped up and craned his neck to see the Inquisitor on her hands and knees gasping for air. “Inquisitor!” he shouted as he sprinted to her side. She didn’t respond. He crouched down beside her, and put his hand on her back between her shoulder blades, feeling the rattling of her wheezing breath. His eyes swept over her stiff form, checking for any physical anomaly that might be causing her such distress. He saw no wounds or blood to indicate the source of the problem, but she continued to gasp and struggle. His own pulse quickened. What could cause this? Poison? Blood magic? “Ahrue! Can you hear me? What happened?”

She tried to speak, but her words were a jumble. He was able to make out the word “stop” just before she went limp. Dorian caught her before her head collided with the flagstone path. He craned his neck frantically looking for someone, anyone, to help. But the garden was deserted.

“Just hold on!” he said to her as he picked her up with relative ease, thanking his lucky stars that the Inquisitor wasn’t a hulking Qunari. He rushed toward the keep with her in his arms, praying with every step that she kept breathing.
Revelation

Ahrue dreamt of the well. They needed the power of the Vir’abelasan. That much was certain. But the thought of this Shemlen witch consuming the wisdom and power of the ancient elves made Ahrue’s throat and stomach tighten. Her nostrils flared at the arrogance and entitlement evident in Morrigan’s words.

“This is my heritage!” Ahrue snapped. “I have spent my entire life in constant study of what few fragments remain of ancient elven knowledge. Knowledge that humans destroyed. I will not see what remains of my birthright devoured by you!”

Morrigan scoffed. “You are a child. You would not be able to understand the power if you had it.”

Ahrue took a menacing step toward Morrigan, “And you haven’t the slightest understanding of what this could mean to my people. I will die before I let a Shemlen take this from us.”

“This is not about heritage or long dead wars,” Morrigan snorted. “We need the Well to stop Corypheus. Do you honestly think that you are better suited to make use of its power than I?”

Ahrue’s eyes snapped to Solas. He more than anyone could be trusted to understand and use this power wisely. He caught the meaning of her glance. “Do not ask,” he said in a strained voice.

A sense of purpose and resolve washed through her. She turned back to Morrigan. “I will drink.” She took a step toward the well but was halted by a hand firmly grasping her elbow. She turned to meet Solas’ stern eyes and set jaw.

He shook his head. “Vhenan. Don’t.”

Ahrue sighed and threw up her hands. “What would you have me do? Let this witch drink?”

He pulled her away from Morrigan and the well and lowered his voice. “Yes.”

Ahrue shook free of his grip. “How can you say that? Do you really trust her with this power more than you trust me?”

His eyes softened but his voice remained firm. “Vhenan. This is not about trust. It is about cost!”

“Yes! It is about the cost of having the knowledge of our ancestors lost to us forever! That history matters more to you than anyone. How can you not understand why I need to do this?” she shouted through brimming tears.

He stroked the tears from her cheek and smiled with a sad tenderness. “I do understand, ma sa’lath. But please, I beg of you, do not drink.”

She looked into his eyes and shook her head. She trusted his council more than anyone’s, but on this matter his feelings for her were getting in the way of his better judgment. Every part of her wanted this, needed this. Her blood burned, telling her to protect the Well with her life. This power and knowledge must remain with the people, no matter the cost. “Ir abelas.” She said, cupping his face in her hands and kissing him softly. “But I must.” She broke away from him and walked briskly into the well.

-x-
When Ahrue turned toward the well, Solas fought the almost overwhelming urge to physically stop her, disable her with magic, destroy the Well. Anything to keep her from drinking. He’d known as soon as he saw the Well that Ahrue would drink. Her indomitable spirit, her insatiable curiosity, her longing for connection to the lost past, and her sense of responsibility to the people; she could not be the person she was and refuse to drink. Even if she understood the full meaning of the geas, she would still drink. Even if she could comprehend the burden of such knowledge and power, she would still drink. Even as he begged her not to, he knew that she would. What’s more, he knew that she should. Despite Morrigan’s belief that she alone could wield the power of the Vir’abelasan, Solas knew in the depths of his being that this was Ahrue’s destiny, and he loved her for it.

Fear gripped him as she lifted her cupped hands to her mouth and tipped the enchanted water into her parted lips. The water of the Vir’abelasan evaporated in a burst of magic, blanketing the room in a thick cold fog. He couldn’t see her! He tried to rush to her, but an unseen force held him in place. He called out to her again and again with no response. Why hadn’t he stopped her? Why hadn’t he explained the cost? Why hadn’t he agreed to drink the water himself?

As the mist cleared, he saw her motionless form in the center of the drained well. The force that had held him in place released and he ran to her. “Live, vhenan,” he whispered soundlessly.

She came suddenly to life. As he reached out to help her she raised her hand to motion for everyone to stand back. He watched as she struggled to her knees and then her feet. “How… do you feel?” he asked in a stunned balance of relief that she still lived and fear that the Well may yet destroy her. He was certain that she was worthy of the Well, but she deserved better.

“Solas?” her voice said from behind him. Behind him?

He turned quickly and the dream faded to black as he gazed upon his beloved. The muscles throughout her face and body were tense, her expression pained. It was really her, not a memory conjured to torture or sooth, and this time she could see him in his elven form. He stood frozen, unable to find the words, afraid that if he tried to touch her she would vanish.

They stared at one another steadily. He opened his mouth to speak, to tell her how precious this memory was to him, to describe the overwhelming love he’d felt for her in the moment she’d stepped into the Well, but she interjected. “You knew?” Her voice was strained and broken, and her lips quivered as she asked. He reached out to her, desperate to explain, but she was gone.

-x-

Ahrue woke in her bed in Skyhold. The dank floral scent of the blood lotus and elfroot poultice pressed to her forehead made her stomach turn. She groaned quietly.

“Ah, you’re awake!” said a familiar voice from across the room.

She lifted her head to try to see who it was. The room responded to her effort by spinning wildly. She closed her eyes before the vertigo got the better of her. “More or less,” she mumbled.

“You had us worried,” said the voice, moving around the bed to her right side.

Ahrue risked opening her right eye to catch a glimpse of her caretaker. Dorian. Her head throbbed violently and she closed her eye again. “Could you get this… thing off of me?” she groaned. “It smells like halla fodder.”

She felt the poultice lift and a hand press to her forehead. “Well, pungent as it may be, your fever
is lower. Stiches is not entirely incompetent, it would seem.”

“What happened? Everything is… hazy.”

“You collapsed in the garden last night. Luckily I was nearby. I carried you in and Bull’s medic spent all night tending to you. I’m here to watch you while he… I don’t know… does whatever these southerners do… Not bathing or reading I expect. Probably rolling in the mud or spitting or… something.”

Ahrue blushed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be any trouble.”

Dorian laughed. “Trouble? No trouble at all! I cut quite the dashing figure heroically carrying a debilitated Inquisitor into her chambers. Positively scandalous! My dance card is filled for months by those desperate to hear every sordid detail!”

Ahrue smiled weakly. “Mhmm. I’m laughing on the inside, I swear.”

She could feel him smoothing the blankets and adjusting her pillows. “If you’re up for some company, there is a veritable throng of concerned parties who’ve been positively clawing at the door for any scraps of news regarding your wellbeing. I can show them in if you like.”

Ahrue fervently shook her head and instantly regretted it upon the aggressive return of vertigo. A little whimper escaped her lips.

Dorian tutted. “Poor dear. Shall I fetch Stiches? Having him here won’t help with the smell, but he’s better equipped than I to tend to what ails you.”

“A eager to escape, are you?” She opened her eyes to see Dorian looking down at her with a knitted brow.

When he realized she was watching him, he quickly shifted his expression to his signature wicked smile. “Well, as I said, my dance card is filled. But, I suppose I can spare some more time. At least until Stitches finishes rubbing nug piss in his hair, or whatever passes for hygiene among Fereldens these days.”

“Well we can’t all afford to bathe in virgin tears and summer wine.”

“Pity. There’s nothing quite so refreshing as a virgin tear bath. Really opens the pores.” Dorian perched on her bedside table and folded his arm, looking down at Ahrue. He frowned. “You really did have me worried, Inquisitor. The way you were wheezing and thrashing about. Not to mention the copious vomiting.”

Ahrue winced.

He smirked. “Don’t worry. A liberal application of virgin tears got the stains right out.”

Dorian continued chatting at her, but Ahrue’s mind was pulled away by the persistent grating hiss of the Well’s whispers. She stared out the grand windows and over the ice capped mountains. She envisioned the distant ruins of the temple nestled in the heart of the Arbor Wilds, its halls deserted for the first time in centuries, its Well drained. She wondered where Abelas and the Sentinels had gone. Her drinking from the Well had released them from their duty, but she couldn’t imagine that this world could be a home to them, even less so than it had become to her.

“You said his name, you know. While you were unconscious.” Dorian’s voice pulled her from her ruminations.

Dorian raised an eyebrow. “No… Solas. Why Abelas?”

She pressed her palms to her eyes, pushing back the faint whispers of the Well. “Sorry. I was thinking about the Vir’abelasan. After I collapsed, I had a dream about the day I drank from the well.”

“Not a happy memory if the thrashing was any indication.”

“No, not exactly. That day at the well… Solas tried to stop me from drinking. At the time I took it as an act of love. But… in that dream… I felt like he knew more than he’d let on. There was a glint of understanding that I hadn’t noticed before. The dream ended and all I could think was he knew. He knew and he left anyway.” Ahrue sighed. She couldn’t quite make sense of it all.

Dorian echoed her sigh. “He treated you abominably, you know. The shame is his to carry, not yours.” He shook his head. “And if he left knowing about your condition? All the worse.”

Condition? Ahrue scrunched up her face. “Wait. What? What do you mean?”

Dorian’s face flushed and he jumped a little. “I… ah… what you meant about him knowing about…” he sputtered. “Wha… What did you mean by that, exactly?”

“I don’t know. It was just a feeling that he knew something. Maybe more about what the Well would do to me. The details faded when the dream ended.” She narrowed her eyes at Dorian who was staring at his shoes now. “Why are you being so strange?”

“Vishante Kafaas,” he mumbled under his breath. “The way you were talking, I thought you knew. And now this is unbelievably awkward.”

“Dorian?”

He got up and started pacing at the foot of the bed for a minute before turning and facing her. “Look. When you collapsed, I brought you inside and sent word for a healer. But it was taking a bloody eternity for anyone to show up, so I did what I could. I’m not much with healing spells, but with a quick ritual of the third eye I could at least determine if you were under some variety of dark curse or blood magic, see if anything was amiss.” His hands fidgeted while he spoke.

“And you found something?” Was he saying that she was under some spell that Solas had known about? Her heart rebelled against the thought.

He looked into her eyes and frowned. “I found something.” He sighed wearily. “You’re with child, my dear.”

Ahrue felt the blood drain from her skin. Her breath caught in her throat. He had to be wrong. She would have sensed it, would have detected the subtle changes in her body, noticed a missed menses. But with all that had happened she’d been distracted. Every time she had a moment’s peace, the voices of the Well asserted themselves, and their hold on her had continued to grow. They had drowned out much of the nuance of her world and clouded her inner eye. Even now, as she pulled her focus inward the demanding whispers of the Vir’abelasan clawed and screamed for her attention. But she pushed past them firmly with all the energy she could muster, and she caught a moment’s flicker of the faint glimmer that Dorian must have sensed—a seed, barely beginning to sprout, nestled within her—before the whispers blotted it from her sight again. She gasped.

Dorian returned to her side and kneeled on the ground next to her. He hesitantly placed his hand
atop hers. She barely noticed him squeezing firmly to still her trembling fingers. “I’m so sorry, Ahrue. With everything that has happened, I can’t imagine that this is entirely welcome news.”

She said nothing. She felt numb.

“Is there anyone whose company you would prefer? Cole perhaps? Or maybe a woman? Josephine?”

Ahrue struggled to form words through the heavy haze that settled on her mind and body. “I… I think I’d like to be alone, please.”

Dorian released her hand and looked at the floor. “Of… of course.” He stood up and approached the stairs, looking back at Ahrue once more. “We are all here for you, my dear. You know that, right?”

She closed her eyes and heard him slowly descending the stairs and leave the room. “Please tell me you didn’t know, vhenan,” she whispered to the empty room.
“Ar lath ma, vhenan,” Solas said as he walked from the balcony to her chambers, heading toward the stairs.

She smiled brightly at him from the threshold. “You can’t say that and expect me to just let you walk away.”

He turned and his eyes flashed impishly. “Did you have something to add?”

She cocked her head and approached him slowly, swaying her hips with each step. When she was close enough to feel the heat of his body, she turned toward the bed, grazing his thighs with her finger tips as she passed him. He caught her wrist gently and pulled her to him. Lovingly scanning her face with his bright eyes, he stroked her cheek and tilted her chin upward for a soft kiss. She took his hands and began to walk backward, drawing him toward the bed.

He laughed. “Mana, vhenan. This is unnecessary. I know this is not the Dalish way; I expect nothing of you.”

He was right. In Dalish culture, sex was reserved for bond-mates. Anything else was considered a debasement of kin and culture. But her clan was very far away right now, and those old traditions suddenly felt oppressively stifling. She raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t generally a fan of the ‘the Dalish way.’ Why chose to honor those traditions now?”

“Because they are a part of you. You have nothing to prove to me.”

Her skin warmed at his words. She’d grown up hearing that flat-ears, like humans, would coerce and manipulate naïve young Dalish into their beds, and leave them before the sun came up. Solas, on the other hand, was all gentleness and understanding. He did not push or coax, and she knew he would still be there in the morning. She intertwined her fingers with his. “It’s not about proving anything, Solas. I want this. Don’t you?”

He nodded and smiled sadly. “I do.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“It… has been a long time. I did not expect this, did not expect you.”

She drew him close. “Neither did I. But right now, this means more to me than any tradition ever has. I’ve never felt this way for anyone. And I’d rather honor and explore what we have than pointlessly observe an empty tradition.”

“It is not empty. But I understand your meaning, and… I would very much like to share this night with you.”

He let her guide him to the bed. She playfully pushed him onto the mattress. He sat up, smiling at her and took her hands as she straddled his lap. “You are certain this is what you want?” he asked again.

She looked into his eyes and kissed him deeply before saying firmly, “Yes. Share this night with me, Solas.”

He brought his lips to her ear and whispered warmly, “Ma nuvenin, ma’arlath.”
“I always knew you were a foolish child,” A familiar voice spoke from the hearth, startling Ahrue. Ahrue whirled to face the intruder. Solas was leaning on the hearth smirking at her. “But I must admit that I was surprised by just how easy it was to convince you abandon your culture and kin, da’len.”

She looked back to the bed and found it vacant. When had he gotten up? She felt disoriented. Solas sauntered toward her, raking her body with his eyes.

“Just a few honeyed clichés and not even your Keeper could have dragged you off of me,” he laughed.

His words cut and confused her. “I… I don’t understand,” she stammered.

He walked behind her and leaned in close to her ear. “Must we go through this every time, vhenan?” He spat the tender word like poison. “Where did you think we were?”

The familiar question focused her and she managed to shake off some of her confusion. “The fade,” she said grimly. Nausea began to set in as her thoughts came into focus.

He circled around to face her. “Well done, da’len.” With his index finger he reached out and traced the contours of her clavicle and followed the path of her sternum while he spoke. Her stomach twisted unpleasantly at his touch. “The cleverness of the Inquisitor is mighty indeed.”

She stared at him unflinching. “Do you expect me to cower or run crying from you? You are a nightmare, nothing more. I’ve faced far worse than you.”

He narrowed his eyes and tightened his mouth in a thin smile. “Ah, and you were doing so well.” He sat on the bed next to her and raised his arms in an exaggerated shrug. “You called me here, Vhenan. So here I am.” He swung his legs onto the bed and laid back with his hands behind his neck. “We should really stop meeting this way. I can’t get a decent night’s sleep when you keep dragging me into your silly pathetic memories.”

“You aren’t Solas,” she said evenly, as much to herself as to him. “Whatever harm you hope to do me, it won’t work.” She started to get up from the bed, but he grabbed her wrist roughly and pulled her to him. She cried out in pain as her hand bent awkwardly.

“Are you really so deluded? Look back on our time together. Does it really make sense? You’ve already begun to notice the holes, the subtle suggestions that everything we shared was a lie, but you stubbornly push them aside, refuse to acknowledge the sad fact that I was using you every step of the way.” He pushed her away and she stumbled to the floor where she glared at him, seething. “Just like a Dalish: why face the truth when a lie is so much more comforting?”

Her lips curled into a snarl. She wanted to rip him apart. But the pain in her wrist made Ahrue uneasy. He had hurt her in the fade, which was more than a simple dream figment could manage. A demon, perhaps.

He jumped from the bed and crouched on the floor beside her, grabbing her face with his long fingers. “Even now you’re trying to push aside anything that doesn’t conform to the pathetic fiction you’ve built for yourself.”

She tried to pull away, but he held her firmly, his fingers pressing painfully into her cheeks and jaw.

He frowned. “I’m not sure what is sadder, the fact that I played you so effortlessly, or the fact that you couldn’t recognize it even after the pieces had all been laid out for you.”
His words clawed at her regardless of who he was. He’d found the most vulnerable part of her heart and dug in deeply.

He cocked his head. “Shall I walk you through it, vhenan?”

“Don’t call me that,” she snarled.

He pouted. “Come now, Inquisitor, I know how it makes the tips of your ears positively tingle. How it makes you feel like a true elvhen.”

Shame stirred within her, but she forced it down with a surge of anger. Her nostrils flared and her fingernails scratched against the floor as she closed her hands into ready fists, prepared to hit this creature if he did not release her.

He put his hands up in mock surrender, laughing. “Very well.” He hopped to his feet and rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Let’s start at the beginning, Da’len. I wanted the orb—you know that much at least—and your anchor seemed the most likely way to find it. Further, you had a rapidly expanding army behind you ready to rip the orb from Corypheus’ grasp. I would have been a fool not to ally with you. And let’s be honest, without me, your efforts to find the orb and destroy Corypheus would have come to nothing. At best—and I’m being very generous here—you and your ‘Inquisition’ would have frozen to death outside Haven.” He laughed.

All true. But this was not Solas.

“But I know what you’re really wondering.” He snapped his fingers, and the room shifted. Suddenly, she was wrapped in his arms on the balcony of her chambers. “You want to know why I pretended to love you.” Her skin crawled at the feel of his body against hers. She attempted to struggle away, but he pinned her arms and held her tightly to his chest while laughing exuberantly. “Really the answer is very simple, vhenan.” He lowered his mouth to her ear and whispered, “Because it amused me.”

The scene shifted again, and they were dancing at Halamshiral, as they had months before. She tried to pull away, but his strength exceeded hers, and he contained her easily without straining or missing a step of the waltz. She felt her energy drain with each effort to escape his grip.

“Every moment of our time together was immensely entertaining, and I do thank you for that, ma sa’lath. There were times when you were almost admirable in your talent for diving head first into the most intriguing scenarios. I’d thought to use you to get to the orb. But I’d never thought I’d enjoy myself so much in the process.”

Again, the setting changed, and they were holding hands by the waterfall in the grove. Every moment of contact with him felt like razors against her flesh. But she didn’t pull away this time; it was futile. She was so tired of fighting. He looked at her face with cold eyes and stroked her cheek with perverse tenderness. “I will forever cherish the look on your beautiful face when I told you it was over. If you’d let me remove the vallaslin it would have been too perfect; the complete rejection of your heritage, all for the affection of a false lover.” His eyes glided down her body to rest on her abdomen. “But then, it seems it all worked out in the end after all.”

Ahrue’s breath was ragged. All true. Among the Dalish, pregnancy outside of bonding was a disgrace. The core responsibility of every Dalish was to keep the old ways and honor the traditions and values of the people. The bonding was among their most sacred traditions, and all Dalish were expected to treat it with sanctity and complete fidelity. She’d violated that tradition by sleeping with Solas, and her pregnancy—by a flat-ear, no less—would stand as an offence to the values of her people, a sign of how far she’d fallen from her heritage.
Solas looked in her eyes and pouted, “I really did ruin you, didn’t I?”

A rush of hopelessness struck her, and she gasped. The story she’d told herself of enduring love and understanding crumbled around her. He’d shined a harsh light on her cherished memories of Solas, corrupting each with his poison. She couldn’t deny the truth of his words, and with the sentimentality and artifice stripped away, she recognized the selfish motives, deft manipulations, half-truths, and betrayals that had defined his every move. The signs had been there all along, but she’d been too foolish to see it.

“But, you had a question for me,” he said, taking her limp hands in his. “You wanted to know if I’d known what seed our love had wrought before I left.”

She looked at him with wide eyes brimming with tears that she didn’t have the energy or will necessary to fight back.

His expression softened into his familiar tender sadness, painfully recalling the moment they had shared here just weeks before. “I didn’t know.” He dropped her hands and stepped back, shaking his head. “But if I had? I wouldn’t have cared.”

Ahrue felt her knees buckle as she watched Solas turn and walk away, leaving her alone in the black.

-x-

Dorian needed a drink. After brusquely assuring the various well-wishers waiting outside the door that the Inquisitor was fine and just needed some rest, he made his way to the tavern, eager to drain a bottle of the strongest and cheapest spirits available. Pushing open the door of the Herald’s Rest, Dorian smiled blissfully as the smell of yeast and oak wafted over him. It was still the early morning and the tavern was all but empty. Good. The last thing Dorian wanted was to hear more gossip and questions about the Inquisitor. Cabot, the dwarven barkeep, eyed him from behind the bar.

“Ah, just the taciturn fellow I wanted to see!” Dorian said sunnily, taking a seat at the bar. “I will take a bottle of whatever five coppers will buy me that will still get me completely drunk before I reach the bottom.” He emptied his money pouch onto the bar. Cabot passed him a brown bottle and a glass. “Good man!”

Dorian had just finished pouring his first glass of barely-drinkable wine when he heard the tavern door open. He turned lazily to see Blackwall and Sera enter. Wonderful. Blackwall took a seat next to Dorian and wordlessly slid three coppers to Cabot. Cabot filled a pint glass with ale and passed it to Blackwall who nodded his appreciation. Sera perched on the edge of the counter, kicking the bar with her swinging feet while Cabot scowled. So much for Dorian’s stolen moment of peace.

Dorian sneered at Blackwall. “Isn’t this a bit early for you to be drinking?”

Blackwall watched Dorian tip the cheap wine into his mouth. “And that is what? Oatmeal?”

“Oh, I said it’s early for you to be drinking. This is a rather late start for me.”

Blackwall frowned. “Right.”

Dorian braced himself for the questions he knew were coming.

“Word has it that the Inquisitor has taken ill.”
Dorian smiled thinly. “And there it is.”

“Morris says, that Rosley says, that Rocky says that Stitches been up in Inquisy’s room all night. Got fetched by the steward just after sundown,” said Sera rapidly. “Morris said, that he said, that he said, that the steward burst in here all red and puff’n, shouting that ‘Quisy was sick as a wet nug, that the twitchy Vint’d carried her in the hall scream’n that she was dying. Needed a proper healer. Bull knocked Stiches’ drink right out of his hand ‘cause he weren’t hurry’n.” Sera’s tone was light, but her face was all worry, eyes wide and strained, mouth tense.

“You were there, weren’t you?” Blackwall asked, his heavy brow furrowed. “Is she alright?”

Dorian took another swig of his wine, skipping the glass this time. Was she alright? He didn’t know how to answer that. He doubted Blackwall and Sera would be satisfied with a decided no, and he wanted to limit any uncomfortable follow-up questions. Best to be evasive. “I’m not the healer, Blackwall. All I did was bring her inside when she collapsed. If you want more information than that, you’ll have to ask Stitches. Or Morris, Rosley, and Rocky, if you prefer.”

“You were there, weren’t you?” Blackwall asked, his heavy brow furrowed. “Is she alright?”

Dorian sighed. He didn’t need this. “Yes, yes. She fainted in the garden. But you needn’t worry. She has survived far worse, you know.” He turned to Sera. “And I assure you I did not run into the hall screaming that she was dying. I carried her in, asked the steward to fetch a healer, and brought her up to her quarters. That’s all. She probably just had too much wine with dinner. Happens to the best of us,” he said before taking another swig from his bottle.

Blackwall shook his head. “She has not seemed herself of late. I fear for her.” He took a draft of his ale. “She should not have drank from that well.”

“Got that right,” said Sera. “Who hears ‘Well of Sorrows’ and think, ‘oh, sounds grand, let’s drink it up?’ Now she’s sad and fainty.” She frowned. “Stupid.”

Dorian had little sense of what role the Well and the pregnancy were playing in the Inquisitor’s current state. It was his understanding that elves were generally hearty when in a family-way, and the Inquisitor was a particularly resilient individual, able to shrug off all but the most grievous injuries. It seemed likely that the Well was at least partly to blame for her illness. Dorian drank. “Yes, well, what’s done is done.”

“I told her to drink. Solas cautioned against it, said the risk was too high, but I insisted that the witch couldn’t be trusted.” Blackwall looked at Dorian intently. “I know less than nothing about magic and elven gods; I should have kept my mouth shut. Solas had the right of it.”

Dorian snorted. “Solas did always have her best interest at heart,” he said ruefully.

Blackwall nodded, not catching Dorian’s irony. “He did. It would tear him apart to see her like this.”

It was too much. Dorian gaped. “Are you serious? He walked out on her! From the very beginning he served nothing but his own selfish motives. He used her to get his precious orb, and when that didn’t work out, he tossed her aside like spoiled meat to the dogs.” Dorian slammed his bottle onto the counter, earning him a glowering look from Cabot.

“Sorry, Beardy,” Sera piped in, “I’m with Magic Pants on this one. Something matters, you don’t leave it. Elfy just wanted someone to tumble about with, and ‘Quisy got used. Hateful bastard.”

“I don’t believe that,” said Blackwall. “He cared for her. I don’t pretend to know why he left, but I
saw his face when the Inquisitor stepped into the Well, the way he tended to her when she was wounded. There was love there.”

Dorian laughed. “He was probably afraid of losing his tool before he was through with her.”

Blackwall stared sternly at Dorian. “You’re wrong,” he said firmly.

“Yes, well, we’ll see about that.” He suspected that when the news of the Inquisitor’s pregnancy got out, Blackwall would amend his position. The man was at heart a romantic, and the thought of Solas abandoning his pregnant lover would no doubt make Blackwall’s blood boil on behalf of the wounded lady.

Blackwall clapped him on the back. “You’re too cynical, Dorian.”

“Is that so?” he said blandly, taking another swig of wine. How he longed to be there when Blackwall would hear the news. Seeing that insufferable optimism crumble to dust would be positively delicious.

They all turned at the sound of Iron Bull’s heavy footfalls descending the stairs. A thrill shudder through Dorian at the sight of the hulking Qunari. Bull took the stool on the opposite side of Dorian, leaning an elbow on the bar. “Just talked to Stitches.”

Dorian flushed. He’d told Stitches about the Inquisitor’s condition because it seemed relevant to his occupation as healer. Seeing the serious look on Iron Bull’s face, he worried if telling the medic would be interpreted as a breach in confidence. If even one indiscrete person caught wind, the gossip would spread like wild fire. “Bull, this really isn’t the place.”

Bull ignored his objection. “Aren’t you supposed to be keeping an eye on her?”

Dorian waved his hand dismissively. “She woke up; we talked; she asked to be alone.”

“She’s awake!” said Sera with sudden brightness.

Blackwall started. “You didn’t mention that you’d talked to her. How was she?”

Dorian’s eyes darted between Bull, Blackwall, and Sera. “Vashante Kafaas! Tired, upset. She complained about the smell of that foul poultice your medic gave her. Now please! Can I enjoy my drink in peace?”

Blackwall’s haggard eyes narrowed. “Upset? What did you do to make her upset?”

“You’re being real dodgy and weird,” said Sera.

Dorian stood up abruptly. “So I’ve heard. Now, I am going to bed. Alone. You fish-wives can carry on gossiping without me. And if you have any further questions about the Inquisitor, I suggest you ask her.” He stomped out of the tavern and slammed the door behind him, bottle of wine in hand.
Out of the darkness came a voice. “Da’len,” Ahrue didn’t need to lift her head to know who spoke the endearment; until a year ago, Keeper Deshanna’s voice had filled her every day, and she knew its heavy round tones better than her own reflection. “Da’len,” came a second voice from the dark, gruff and stern: Hahren Hawel, her grandfather and storyteller of clan Lavellan. Growing up, everything Ahrue knew about magic, history, tradition, language, culture, and the value of kin had come from these two people.

Ahrue remained in her position on the ground, her head and arms hung limply and her legs bent beneath her. She could not bear to look in the eyes of her teachers; the humiliation and pain she felt was too heavy. “Why have you come,” she muttered through her grief-tightened throat.

“I am the greeting you give your elders?” said Hawel.

“Has it been so long that you’ve forgotten the proper greeting among The People?” said Deshanna.

“Andaran atish’an, Hahren. Andaran atish’an, Keeper,” Ahrue said weakly.

Hawel growled, “The words sound flat in your mouth. But you have taken a liking to flatness, haven’t you.”

Ahrue said nothing. Shame thickened in her like black bile.

“Had you thought to return to The People?” Deshanna asked forcefully. “Did you think to hide from us how far you had fallen?”

She had. Up until her conversation with Cole on the battlements, she’d thought to return to clan Lavellan once her work as Inquisitor was complete. Cole had made her doubt, but even now, the option of going back comforted her. There was a home if she wanted it, a family who loved her, a clan who’d placed her in a position of respect and admiration. If she returned to her clan, it would be with the intention of leaving the past year entirely behind her. She would not mention Solas or anything she’d done in her time away that would raise questions about her commitment to Dalish values. She would downplay her role as Herald. She would not tell them the truth about the vallaslin or what she’d come to understand of the old gods. She would hide everything from them and think it a kindness.

“You thought to quietly poison us with what you have become, a snake hiding in the guise of a sister?” Deshanna spat.

“But you could not have hidden for long. What lies would you tell to explain away your swelling womb? Perhaps a speedy bonding to a hapless lethallin who could be convinced that the child was his?” Hawel growled.

“Or would you take a tincture of deathroot and embrium to clean your womb of the shameful thing? Would you congratulate yourself on your successful deception of your clan?”

“I would,” she whispered. It would be better that way.

“You would take your place as my First, thinking you could hide your unworthiness from all of us?”

“Yes,” Ahrue choked on the word.
Deshanna’s voice was suddenly very close, hissing in her ear. “You would be wrong. I would feel the influence of the Shemlen world in your very breath, would sense its corruption in you. I would cast you out to save the clan from your poison.”

“Thank the Creators that your mother and father didn’t live to see what you would become, herellan.”

Herellan. Kin traitor. The truth of it settled in her like a hard grey stone. Pretending to uphold the old ways while her flesh was marked by her willing betrayal? It was a variation on the old stories of cunning traitors and outcasts who hurt and manipulated the People for their own selfish gain. Now even her thoughts rebelled against the values held by her clan, searching for ways to effectively deceive her kin rather than for ways to adhere to their understanding of the world. While the shame was thick in her, she could not muster a repentant sentiment to palliate that bilious feeling, to give her a path back to belonging. She had no place among the People.

Another voice spoke from the dark. “Come now, Inquisitor,” said Dorian cheerily. “Surely you didn’t think yourself suited to slumming it in the woods with a pack of unwashed elves any longer?” He laughed. “Picturing you rolling in the dirt, foraging for twigs and berries and what-have-you… Tell me, does the Herald of Andraste shit in the woods?”

“To be fair, she did do her share of foraging while with the Inquisition. You can’t open a cupboard in Skyhold without being buried in an avalanche of Elfroot,” said Varric dryly.

“Hmmm,” said Dorian. “You make an excellent point. At least we manage to keep her in shoes for the bulk of the day.”

“And the halla dank finally wore off,” added Sera. “ Mostly .”

“Certainly she is a work-in-progress,” Josephine said hesitantly. “But, her… rustic background lends to her charm.”

“It shows how far she has risen, how the grace of the Maker can lift even the lowliest of us to fit his plan, if we only submit ourselves to his divine will,” said Cassandra.

“Everyone deserves a second chance, even you,” said Blackwall.

“Yes,” said Vivienne warily. “You can’t help your lowly origin, my dear. But, with a little effort and charm, you could have some small say in what you become. Someday, with considerable practice, you might even be able to appear before court without completely embarrassing yourself.”

“Do be serious, Vivienne,” said Leliana. “Did you see the way the nobles looked at her in the Winter Palace?”

Vivienne sighed. “I know. You’re right of course, Leliana dear. With that tattooed face and pointed ears, they’d sooner accept a rat in their pudding.”

“It’s okay, boss. You’ll get used to it,” said Iron Bull.

“Yes, pariah- hood has its charms,” added Dorian.

Cullen scoffed. “You have the Inquisition’s army at your command. Whatever you lack in charm and social grace, you’ll more than make up for in military might. If they don’t respect you, let them fear you.”

“Come now, Cullen,” said Vivienne. “If she is going to maintain any relevance, she’ll need to find
some ways to overcome her... deficiencies. You wouldn’t mind if we clipped your ears, would you, darling?”

“Oh!” Josephine interjected. “A mask! Something in spun gold!”

“Hmm,” said Dorian. “That would conceal those garish tattoos.”

“Pfft. She’d still be elf-boney. Clacking about on the ballroom floor,” said Sera, giggling.

The group let out a collective sigh. Ahrue felt her blood burn, but exhaustion kept her from acting.

“We’ll do our best with you, darling. But it would be prudent to keep your expectations realistic,” said Vivienne.

“And there is the matter of your... indiscretion,” said Josephine. “People will talk.”

“We could keep her in seclusion, give the child to the Chantry upon its arrival. No one need be the wiser,” Leliana said.

“I’d go ‘immaculate conception,’” said Varric. “Makes for a better story.”

Dorian laughed. “Delightful! Andraste reborn through her Herald!”

“As an elf?” Vivienne ask derisively. “Surely, you must be joking.”

“It could give the Chantry and the Inquisition more credence with the elves,” said Josephine. “Thus far, they have remained marginal to our cause.”

“And the more elves in our ranks, the fewer human lives we’d be forced to risk in martial endeavors,” Cullen added.

“If we play our cards right, we may even be able to appeal to the Dalish. At long last, bring them into fold. I’ll see about adding an alienage to Skyhold. Perhaps by the stables?” Said Josephine.

“Josie is right,” said Leliana. “We can use this to our advantage. If people object, a few key clerics can be convinced to support us, to claim that the Herald’s child, Andraste reborn, is a sign that all the people of Thedas, regardless of race, have been called to embrace the Chant of Light.”

“A proposition that the next Divine will undoubtedly support,” Vivienne said, knowingly, “which will give the notion—ridiculous as it may be—undeniable credence with humans and elves alike.”

“The time has come for the elves to see the light of the Maker, to aspire to do his will or face his wrath,” said Cassandra dreamily.

“So let it be,” they said in chorus, and then burst out into uproarious laughter.

It was a joke. The demon mocked her fears, but the seed of truth was there. Whatever Ahrue did, whatever she was, her team of advisors would spin it into an image that furthered the purpose of the Inquisition. From the beginning, her race had been used with strategy and careful intention by the Inquisition. Many elves had already been drawn to their cause because the Herald was of their race. She’d personally used this racial connection to recruit useful agents, healers, and politicians. She’d even called on her own clan to support her efforts in the Free Marches. The shame thickened in her. How much had she already participated in the erosion of her people’s sovereignty? If they failed to submit to the path the ‘Maker’ called them to follow, how would the Inquisition respond? How long before an exalted march closed upon the clans spread throughout Thedas? Had she
heralded the death of The People? And would that death come through integration, a slow stifling of everything elven, or war? She retched at the thought, lurching forward. Herellan.

-x-

It had been a long night. From his seat by the fire, Varric had watched people go in and out of Ahrue’s quarters all night carrying hot water and satchels of various medicinal plants, among other assorted materials that Varric could remember seeing in Blondie’s clinic back in Dark Town. It made him worry. Whatever had caused the Inquisitor to collapse in the garden, it was being taken very seriously. Within hours, the news about the Inquisitor’s collapse had spread, and by the early morning, the hall was buzzing with people waiting for news about her wellbeing. Cullen had been pacing in front of her door for hours. Occasionally they would make eye contact and share a concerned nod.

When Stitches emerged from the room just before sunrise, Cullen practically pounced on him for information. Varric jogged over to hear the update.

“She had a bad night of it, but she’s resting more or less comfortably now,” Stitches said, dabbing his brow with a handkerchief.

“But what caused this?” Cullen said a little too forcefully.

Stitches took a step back. “She’s being tended to, sir.” He raised his voice so all the people crowded around could hear. “The Inquisitor is resting comfortably. There is nothing to be concerned about. Probably just a virus paired with dehydration.”

A chorus of gasps echoed through the room.

“Not a contagious virus. A completely not contagious virus,” he said, sweating. “She will need time to recover. In the meantime, she is being tended to by myself and other qualified parties. So, I suggest you all go about your business. And leave.” He left abruptly, keeping his distance from a glowering Cullen as he made his way through the dispersing throng.

Varric looked up at Cullen whose eyes remained fixed on the Inquisitor’s door. He tapped him on the arm. “What do you say, Curly? How about a game of diamond back to pass the time?”

Cullen looked down at him blankly. “I… have duties to attend to. Would you…”

“Send word if anything changes? You got it.”

Cullen nodded gratefully and stomped off in the direction of the war room.

Varric passed the next two hours playing diamond back with himself in full view of the Inquisitor’s door. Then Dorian emerged looking worse for wear. He had a dazed expression and was practically jogging toward the great door in his effort to avoid the concerned questions from various well-wishers. “Whoa!” Varric called to him when he came within ear-shot. “Sparkler! What’s the word?”

Dorian slumped and sighed at the sound of his nickname and reluctantly walked over to Varric. “She woke up; she’s tired; I’m tired,” he said brusquely.

“Is someone with her?” Varric asked. He hadn’t seen anyone come in or out of Ahrue’s quarters for hours.

“No. She asked to be left alone. Apparently having half of Thedas tending to her after a fainting
spell is a little trying. I suggest you leave her be for now,” Dorian snapped.

Varric held up his hands. “Alright. Take it easy, Sparkler. I just wanted to know if I could do anything to help. Maybe take a shift keeping an eye on her.”

Dorian rubbed his eyes. “No. Just… she needs some rest.” He walked out looking haggard.

Varric obeyed Dorian’s advice to leave the Inquisitor be and resumed his game. But the strained tone of Dorian’s voice and the uneasiness of his posture continued to eat at Varric as the hours passed.

“Business is thorny, knowing when to mind or meddle,” said Cole, suddenly beside him. “The mother’s pillow, precious, present. A human thing. ‘You’ve been a friend to me, Varric.’ Turned away.”

Varric sighed. His last conversation with Anders. He’d caught the fatalism in Blondie’s goodbye, known it couldn’t mean anything good, but hadn’t acted. And then the Chantry blew up.

“You wonder if you’d said the right thing to him or Hawke if it wouldn’t have happened, if you could have helped his hurting, held on to the human part. Why didn’t you try?”

“I minded when I should have meddled,” said Varric darkly. He’d put it on Hawke to handle. He’d figured if Justice got out of hand, she’d notice and know what to do about it. But Hawke’s own hatred for the Templars and affection for her friend had made her hesitant to act. She hadn’t seen how much Justice had taken over until it was too late. He could have carried that weight for her, could have made her see that Anders was losing to Justice, he could have told the Templars. But he’d stayed out of it, people died, and Hawke blamed herself.

“You worry that this is the same. That you won’t try, and things will go badly,” said Cole.

“Not exactly, kid. I’d be pretty surprised if the Inquisitor blew up a bunch of priests to make a political statement.”

“She pulls away. But Daisies need the sun.”

Varric winced, remembering Daisy’s obsession with the mirror, again left to Hawke to solve, again it went wrong. He looked up at the Inquisitor’s door. “Come on, kid. Let’s meddle.”

Varric and Cole topped the stairs. The Inquisitor was fast asleep. She looked pale, fragile, and still as the stone. Like death. Varric felt suddenly uneasy and panicked. He wasn’t going to be able to help the Inquisitor. He would fail her, just like he’d failed anyone who’d ever depended on him. What was the point in trying? Why did he ever think he could help? His ‘help’ only ever put people in danger. He’d eventually get all his friends killed. He wanted to leave the room, leave the Inquisition, find some quiet corner of Thedas where no one would ever depend on him again, a place where he couldn’t let people down. He needed to get away.

Cole grabbed him. “Varrie!”

His head swam. “What? What was I…”

Cole pointed at Ahrue. “A slow death comes from the hungry dark. It tears at the truth, killing hope. Finds the secret hurt and feeds on the despair that it sows there.”

Varric’s lungs tightened. “I’m getting Cullen.”
Cullen tried to distract himself with troop movements and reports. Things had been relatively quiet around Thedas since the Inquisitor had defeated Corypheus. Which was good, but it also meant that his work wasn’t quite as consuming as it had been over the past year. His thoughts were drawn repeatedly to the Inquisitor. She had not been herself since returning from Haven. Cullen had thought it best to give her space and quietly take on most of her responsibilities to lighten the burden placed on her; he’d understood the unseen wounds sustained in battle, and known that healing took time. He’d wanted to give her that. So he’d watched from a distance as she’d tried to come to terms with all she’d been through, caring for her by letting her be and had encouraged others to do the same.

But when the messenger had brought him news of Ahrue’s collapse in the garden, he’d second guessed his choices. Had he misjudged her need? His jaw clinched at the thought. In many ways, she had come to represent his salvation. She was the Herald and Inquisitor, and through following her, he had finally found a place for himself where he knew he was doing the Maker’s work. She’d also supported him through his difficult rehabilitation, helping him attain a sense of peace that he’d thought impossible. Further, she was a mage. He had baulked at that fact at first, but he’d come to see her as a chance for redemption and healing. He could not undo his role in the uprising in Kirkwall, but with the Inquisitor he had proven to himself, and hopefully to her, that he had changed. Mages had deserved his protection and understanding. He’d failed them. He would not fail her.

Now he worried that he had failed her after all. The caginess of the healer when he’d emerged from the Herald’s quarters had made Cullen bristle. Something was not right. His thoughts kept returning to blood magic. He knew that jumping from unexplained illness to sinister magic was a pattern of thought that was more habitual than practical. Still, sometimes it was blood magic. Kirkwall had proven that. But he tried to focus on the likeliness of mundane explanations: poison, exhaustion, dehydration, or ordinary illness. Despite her strength and heroism, she was mortal. A vial of deathroot stirred into her wine would fell her just as easily as it would a merchant or a farmer.

He shuddered at the thought. Losing her would be unthinkable. He’d been given no indication that she saw him as anything more than a trusted comrade, and Cullen didn’t hope for anything more. Still, knowing that she was in the world, that rush of warmth he felt when seeing her and talking to her, it reassured him to know that he could still care for someone. It had been a long time since he’d wanted anyone in his life, and he’d doubted that he ever would again. But she changed that. It seemed the tortures he’d endured in the Circle tower had not closed his heart off permanently after all. He did not want to think of what it would do to him to lose her, especially if the cause was something he could have prevented.

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The door to the war room burst open, startling Cullen out of his brooding. Varric stood breathless in the doorway. “Curly. We need you upstairs. Now. Demon had the Inquisitor.”

His blood pulsed hot as he reached instinctively for his blade at his waist.

“Easy!” shouted Varric. “Call me an optimist, but I’m hoping you won’t have to use that.”

Cullen kept his hand on the hilt and ran with Varric toward the Inquisitor’s quarters. He prayed that she was not an abomination. Varric did not know what cruelty it was to summon him instead of another Templar. If he was forced to strike the killing blow…

He topped the stairs and instantly felt the rush of despair. He looked at Ahrue and his stomach gripped, certain she was already dead. He should have acted sooner.
Cole put his hands on his shoulder. “It isn’t real. She is still alive and herself.”

Cullen closed his eyes to center himself, drawing on his Templar training. He was not as resistant to the demon’s influence as he would have been while taking lyrium, but he could still find that part of himself that was deeply rooted to this world. He breathed deeply and slowly, and the influence of the demon faded to a persistent melancholy. “How did this happen?”

“Her pain drew it here. The anchor and her magic made it easy, part of her always in both places, a path. Each hurt a bread crumb leading it through.”

“Her pain,” Cullen said. He shouldn’t have kept his distance. He should have helped her more directly.

“Dorian told her about the seed she didn’t know they’d planted. The new hurt reached backward and forward, a path of sorrow.”

Varric rubbed his eyes. “Kid, you’re going to have to be a little clearer than that.”

Cole blinked. “Full moon golden over the Emerald Graves. Their blood knows the songs the forest sings. ‘Our people were here. Can you feel it?’ Camp is quiet. They sneak away into the tall bright grass. His hands gentle and deft as he brings her to her fullness. He asks her if she wants him inside and she gasps her answer in the tongue they share. Filled with light, they draw from each other generously, and their seed takes root in her soft earth.”

Cullen gaped, and Varric stammered, “That was… uh… much clearer.”

Cullen flushed. “She is… with child?”

“It… is not a child yet, but it is becoming one. She didn’t know before, but now she does. The knowing hurt.”

“Well, shit,” said Varric, rubbing his neck.

Cullen tried to shake off his embarrassment and the twinge of jealousy he felt in his stomach. “But the demon has not taken hold?”

Cole walked to Ahrue’s bedside and touched her face gently. “No. Taking truth and twisting. It feeds, destroying hope with every step. Soon it will try for more.”

“She will not give in. Whatever it offers her, she will not consent to give herself to a demon,” said Cullen firmly, certain of her strength.

“It burns the paths that lead her back. Hope turns to ash. She won’t know she has a choice.”

Varric shook his head and frowned. “Destroying hope. I don’t know that anyone could keep up a fight for long without hope.”

Cullen remembered his own struggle against the demons in the Circle Tower ten years ago. If the Hero of Ferelden had not arrived when she did, Cullen wasn’t sure he could have held out much longer. His heart ached for Ahrue. “You’d be surprised how long people can hold out against the torments of a demon. But you’re right, if she cannot find a way out she will die if she does not yield.” He turned to Cole. He was a spirit of compassion. Perhaps he could help. He would not ordinarily have turned to the strange creature for assistance, but these were desperate times. “Cole, can you enter her mind? Help her fight against the demon.”
Cole frowned. “I tried. Despair is strong.”

“Then what do we do?” said Varric.

Cullen remembered the harrowings he’d been a part of, watching young apprentices be sent into the fade to battle demons while he held his sword at the ready in case they failed. Looking back, it seemed cruel. But he’d been taught that it was necessary. The mages would come out of the experience having confidence in their abilities to reject the influence of demons and would be less likely to fall prey in the future. He wasn’t sure if that was really the case; desperation seemed to be more of a drive to possession than inexperience or lack of confidence. Just the same, he’d gone into every harrowing expecting the apprentice to fail, and at every harrowing he’d attended, the young mages had emerged victorious. Granted, in harrowings the apprentices faced minor demons, not the powerful despair demon who now held sway over the Herald. But the fact that the apprentices almost always succeeded gave Cullen a sliver of hope. He turned to Varric. “We must wait, and have faith.”
The Path of Sorrow

The ground beneath Ahrue’s splayed fingers felt thick, pliable, and cold. She could barely manage the strength to lift her head. Everything hurt. Her lungs burned with every breath, her muscles ached with extreme exhaustion, and her skin was so raw that even contact with the air around her sent stinging waves of white hot pain through her body. She forced her eyes open. In front of her was a dark swamp. An inky black bog stretched as far as she could see. Two rickety wooden paths supported by stilts traversed the bog. Low whispers hissed beneath the creaking of the paths.

Ahrue shakily pushed herself to a standing position. She cried out as pain shot through her body like lightning. She took a step forward, and the agony of moving almost overcame her. She took another step and her legs buckled beneath her, sending her back to her hands and knees.

“Still fighting but fearful and futile,” said a hollow voice behind her. “You can’t go on.”

“Cole?” the name lacerated her throat as she spoke it, but his presence struck a small spark of hope in her chest. “Please… help me.”

He circled to the front of her and crouched to her level. “I can help the hurting,” he said, and he pulled a dagger from its sheath.

She shook her head weakly. “No… not like that. Help me to the paths ahead. I need… to get out of here.”

“Which path?” he asked giving her his hand to help her up.

An anguished gasp escaped her lips as Cole pulled her to a standing position. “Where do they lead?”

He pointed down the left path. “Keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. Kin but not kind to the one who can’t be kept.”

Her clan. The Dalish. She couldn’t return to them. Herellan. She would always be a kin traitor, and if they didn’t kill her for it, the shame and lies would gradually consume her until she was an empty husk. She didn’t have the strength or courage to face their well-earned hatred of her. She’d rather die. “The other path? Where does it lead?”

He pointed to the right. “Into the darkness unafraid. They spread their burning light across the world until all are ash or flame.”

The Inquisition. She could not continue to be a part of their imperial push to bring order and light to all corners of Thedas. She feared the damage she had already done to her people by her involvement with the Inquisition. She would not allow herself to be used as a tool of their further growth.

She faced Cole, eyes wide and pleading. “Please, Cole. I need another way out.”

“I can help your hurting.” His dagger flashed. “It is what you want.”

She tried not to want it, tried not to think of the blade slicing her throat, her neck smiling open in a sigh of relief. “There are… other ways to help,” the words struggled out.

“No. This is your shape.”
She looked at the blade. The sight of it was calming. Just a moment of pain and a rush of blood and it would be over. No dreams, no shame, no broken heart. She would no longer pose a danger to her people. The whispering of the Vir’abelasan would be quiet at last,

As though summoned by her thought, the whispers from the bog grew louder. Ahrue’s head throbbed in protest. She stumbled backward, almost falling again.

“It would be a kindness,” said Cole, taking a step toward her.

“I… I don’t…” she stuttered as the whispers continued to grow louder.

“A quick cutting kindness. And then solace, sleep.”

She wanted to want to say no. But the mercy he was offering tempted her beyond her strength to fight. Compassion would see her gently to the void. She looked at him, her eyes brimming with hopeless surrender and gratitude. She smiled sadly, opened her mouth to speak, but it was difficult to find the words through the deafening whispers of the well that now shook the ground beneath her.

As she steadied herself against the shaking, she noticed a flicker of blue light behind Cole. “What is that?” she shouted above the din.

He pivoted to look in the direction she was staring and quickly turned back to her. “There is nothing for you. All paths lead to sorrow.”

The glint of light grew slightly brighter. She stumbled around Cole to get a better view. Glowing blue runes stretched forward in a narrow constellation of points across the surface of the bog, between the two wooden paths. They were hazy, but the longer she looked at them, the brighter they became. “Is that another path?” she asked Cole, taking a couple cautious steps toward the bog.

Cole grabbed her arm roughly. “No! It will lead you to more sorrow and shame!”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Is it a path or not?”

Cole brought his dagger close to her neck. “I am offering you mercy! Solace from sorrow and shame. A safe sleep! Let me help.”

Ahrue shook free of his grasp. A sense of strength had begun to fill her. Although the whispers continued to grow, she felt steady with them shaking beneath her. “Why won’t you tell me about the third path?”

He lunged for her with his dagger. She jumped back barely evading his blade and thrust her arms forward. The power of the whispers surged up from the ground and through her body in a wave of sound, knocking Cole to the ground. “Stop!” he shouted reaching toward her, his voice deep and distorted.

She looked at him and ahead at the glowing path. Filled with certainty, she sprinted for the points of blue light. The path they marked felt firm beneath her feet even as the bog roiled below. She heard Cole screaming behind her, but she ran forward, his shouts fading as she went. A white light appeared in the distance ahead. The whispers continued to grow louder, still incomprehensible, but she detected a pattern in the cacophony, a music that organized the innumerable voices. With every step she felt lighter and the pain in her body gradually released. She ran for what felt like days with ceaseless energy. She came to a stop just before she reached the apex of the bright whiteness ahead. It was too bright to see what the next step would bring. She took a deep breath, gathering her courage, and jumped through.
Ahrue sat up abruptly, and everyone in the room jumped. She heard the sliding of metal on leather as Cullen drew his sword. Varric and Cole both jumped between them holding up their hands and shouting at Cullen to stop.

“Stand back,” said Cullen sternly. “We do not know if she is possessed.”

“She is free, floating, flying, fleetly into the light,” said Cole.

“I understand you wanting to make sure, Curly, but don’t you think that running her through is a bit of an extreme method for fact checking.”

He stomped forward and shouldered them out of the way. He stood beside her, took a deep breath and raised his sword.

Still weak and disoriented, Ahrue could only throw her arms over head, bracing herself for the blow to land. It did, but far more gently than she’d expected. She felt the blood blooming on her arm where the blade had nicked her. She looked up at Cullen who slumped forward and let his blade clatter to the ground.

“I’m sorry, Inquisitor,” he said in a trembling voice. “I had to be sure. Forgive me.”

She lowered her arms and inspected the wound that he’d dealt her. She glared at him. “Maybe in a while,” she said blandly. “Hand me a bandage.”

Cullen reddened and fetched a towel from the nightstand. He reached for her arm, waiting for her to nod permission before tending to her wound. His hands shook slightly as he wrapped the towel around her arm, and applied firm pressure to the cut. “We knew you were battling a despair demon. I had faith you would win, but if I’d been wrong…”

Seeing how shaken he was took some of the fire out of Ahrue’s anger. “It’s fine, Cullen. I understand.”

“Are you alright?” said Varric cautiously.

“It isn’t deep. I’ll be fine.”

“Not that. The demon. What happened in there?”

She didn’t want to think about it. These three people looking at her with deep concern had just been instruments of Despair, torturing her, digging at her vulnerabilities with a cruelty that continued to cut even now. “I… it was… despair.” She fumbled for words that would satisfy his question without exposing those tender wounds that still bled beneath the surface. “I don’t think I can--”

“Stop,” said Cullen softly. She looked into his warm eyes, glassy with remembered trauma. “You don’t have to say anything. Demons… They know our deepest shames, fears… desires, and they twist them, eroding at our values and sense of self. No words suffice to describe the anguish they bring. That you made it through at all… Be grateful, as I am, that you came back to us.”

The intimacy of his caring gaze alarmed Ahrue, and she looked abruptly away. “Thank you,” she said softly.

He stepped back, perhaps out of respect for her discomfort. “Of course.”
“And everything else?” asked Varric hesitantly. “You feel okay?”

She really wasn’t sure. While she had successfully escaped the demon, the pain that it had fed on was not gone. If anything, Despair had brought it into sharper focus. Solas abandoning her, her pregnancy, her failure to uphold the values of the Dalish, her anxiety about her role as Inquisitor and Herald. The demon may have twisted these wounds into monstrous shapes, but there was enough truth in what it had shown her that she couldn’t brush them off as mere tricks of the fade.

“The third path glows brightly through the dark, the old song lifts her. A new shape,” said Cole. Ahrue smiled softly. There was that.

“What?” said Cullen forcefully. “What are you on about, Cole?”

“It’s something I saw in the fade,” said Ahrue. “I need to think about it.”

Cullen looked at her, his brow knit and his shoulder sunk. “I feel I must tell you: Cole informed us about your condition. Your child. My apologies for invading your privacy, Inquisitor. But I assure you, we will approach the matter with the utmost discretion. Word of your pregnancy will not leave these walls until you wish it.”

She felt the blood rush to her face. She was not used to having others so aware of the inner workings of her body. Their knowledge felt invasive. She would have preferred to decide what to do about her pregnancy without feeling the judgment of Thedas press on her. Despite Cullen’s assurances, she was sure the news would spread quickly. However many healers had tended to her while she slept, each would whisper the news to another in confidence, and each confidant would confide in another, on and on. “I appreciate it, Cullen. But gossip spreads against our best intentions. I’m sure it will be well known soon enough, through no fault of yours.”

Cullen snorted. “You’re right about that. Then allow me to simply offer my support. Whatever you require, my lady. It will be done.”

If she asked, would he fetch her the deathroot and embrium? She doubted it. “It will be fine, Cullen. Thank you.”

The door at the bottom of the stairs creaked open, and the soft thud of footfalls signaled Stitches’ arrival.

He looked warily at Cullen. “Good to see you’re awake, Inquisitor. And entertaining…” he said gruffly.

Cullen took the healer’s cue and bowed to Ahrue. “I’ll take my leave of you, my lady.”

Cullen left quickly with Varric and Cole following quickly behind him while Stitches tutted at Ahrue’s returned fever and let out a fuming “Oi!” at the sight of her bleeding arm.

Ahrue directed her attention inward. Her focus cut through the whispers of the Vir’abelasan smoothly this time. The life within her womb glowed softly, passively. She could not settle on a feeling about its presence. Warmth and coldness rushed through her in alternating currents. She had never seriously considered becoming a mother. It had been an abstract possibility that had fleetingly excited her while she made love to Solas. The thrill of that possibility hadn’t emerged from a true desire to procreate, but from a powerful recognition of the creative potential of their bodies as they clung breathlessly to one another, his skin damp and hot against her own. That potential still had its appeal, but she had difficulty envisioning the concrete reality of a child in her life.
She wondered how she would have felt about the pregnancy if Solas had stayed, how he would have responded had they found out before he left. The despair demon had told her that he wouldn’t have cared, and Ahrue winced at the possibility that it might have been true. She suspected, however, that the news would have hurt him, touched him deeply, and that he would have left anyway. She wondered if the news of her pregnancy would reach him in the fade through spirits or dreams. On multiple occasions, she’d woken up from a dream about him with a lingering sense that he had actually been there with her. Did he still watch her from the fade? Would he watch their child? Did she even want him to?

In any event, she didn’t want to see him just then. The cold cruelty of the despair demon’s impersonation of Solas had infected some of her most cherished memories of their time together, corrupting them with violence, deception, and shame. She saw their relationship in double, and for the moment, the cruel version had more sway over her. If Solas came to her now, she would recoil at his touch and hear venom hidden beneath his affectionate words.

Ahrue asked Stitches if he could give her something for a dreamless night. He grumbled something about the importance of natural sleep, but agreed to fetch her the requested distillation. At least it would guarantee one night’s reprieve.
After a night of undisturbed sleep, Ahrue politely dismissed the healer. He protested, but with her fever gone, and the vertigo abated, he couldn’t mount a convincing argument for the continuation of his services. She stepped out of her quarters just long enough to tell the guard near her door that she wanted no disturbances from anyone save the chamber maid. Any matters of immediate concern should be directed to Cullen, Leliana, or Josephine. Ahrue was to be considered unavailable.

Everything that had happened, it would take time and space to process. Time and space away from the faces that had so recently tormented her in the fade. And deciding where to go from here would require careful thought. Despair’s nightmare had strengthened her sense that there was no place for her here at Skyhold, and she’d been forced to firmly acknowledge that she could not resume her role as First of her Clan. She was resolved to find a different path, and the answer seemed to be with the whispers of the Vir’abelasan, the path brightly lighting her way through the bog of despair.

Her breath tightened to think at how close she had come to losing herself to Despair. The power of the well had saved her. Without it, she would have asked the demon to kill her and felt gratitude for the favor, while an abomination took hold of her body. Thankfully, the Well had a different plan for her. She wasn’t sure if the path and power she had used in the fade bog had been through her own will or the will of Mythal. Regardless, she felt closer to understanding the power and knowledge of the Well than she had before. Now the whispers seemed more organized and less obtrusive, but still incomprehensible.

Since drinking from the Vir’abelasan, understanding had come to Ahrue in short bursts that quickly dissipated, usually when she was in a place that belonged to Mythal. Each time, she’d only been given what she’d needed at the precise moment, and only in so far as it related to defeating Corypheus. She’d been granted no more. Her experience in the fade marked the first time that the Well had aided her since Corypheus’ death. Either Mythal had other plans for her or she was gradually learning to access the well’s power.

She was certain the knowledge of the Well was within her. The whispers pulled at her, wanting to be heard, but without the hand of Mythal pulling them into focus, they remained cacophonous. Mythal was the most likely key to finding the answers she wanted, but asking her for help seemed risky. When they’d met, Mythal had used Ahrue against her will to help her steal the soul essence of Morrigan’s son. Ahrue didn’t relish the thought of being controlled again. Ultimately, regardless of whether she sought her or not, Ahrue belonged to Mythal now and forever. The geas would hold her no matter where she traveled. But she preferred the less overt control of fate to Flemeth’s puppet work. Better to not present herself as a tool ready at hand.

Her other obvious route to answers was to seek out the Sentinels of the Temple of Mythal. They had protected the Well for ages and certainly knew more about its power than anyone living. They had fought to preserve the Well for centuries, to safeguard its power and knowledge from the unworthy. Abelas had granted Ahrue access in order to save the Well from Corypheus and, she believed, because he’d seen worthiness in her. If she went to him with an honest intent to devote herself to honoring the knowledge and power of the Well, would he turn her away? She didn’t think he would.

When the Sentinels had left the temple, they had not said where they’d go. They’d shown no interest in The People or in fighting Corypheus with the Inquisition. Perhaps they too had feared
the path the Inquisition would lead them down in its quest to restore order. For the third time, Ahrue felt a deep sense of kinship with the Sentinels. Like her, they’d been offered the paths of the Dalish and the Inquisition, and turned from each. Like her, their connection to the Well and Mythal had given them a shape that could not fit smoothly in the changed world.

That Ahrue’s new path should converge with theirs seemed fitting and inevitable. But she was not sure how to find them. It seemed likely that they would seek out places that still sang the old songs. Her skin warmed as she recalled the Emerald Graves, the way the forest’s memory spoke to her blood and called her and Solas into the moonlight away from camp. She shuddered pleasantly. At least Despair had left that particular memory untouched.

Beginning her search in the Arbor Wilds and Emerald Graves seemed a promising start. If she could not find physical traces of the Sentinels there, perhaps the old songs of those places would awaken the whispers of the Well. Her muscles tightened at the thought. She had not returned to that region since her visit to the Altar of Mythal where she’d called upon the Guardian. That place had indeed awoken the power of the Vir’abelasan, but the force of that power had frightened her. At the Altar she had felt herself recede as the Vir’Abelasan asserted itself. She had a deep fear that following this path would change her beyond recognition.

Still, she was adamant in her decision. Whatever dangers the well’s power posed, resisting its influence had nearly killed her. And she increasingly believed that the knowledge of the well was worth any cost. She hoped that her mind could be the controlling power that would unify and structure the voices of the well, but should her voice be reduced to one among many, it would not lessen the value of the Well’s gift.

She recalled the certainty she’d felt when she’d decided to drink. She’d stood against Morrigan and Solas, defiant. Nothing they could say or do would have convinced her not to drink. She’d felt no fear as she’d stepped into the Well, only a clear sense of duty and resolve. It was her destiny. She’d known it then. It was as though every moment of her life had drawn her to that place, prepared her for the responsibility that the Well demanded she undertake. But after she drank, when the full weight of it had hit her, she’d resisted, pulled away, and fought the Well’s power and knowledge.

She gazed into the faint glow of the mark on her left hand: a piece of the fade anchored to this world, to her. She’d resisted the anchor just as she’d been resisting the Well. Not the power of it, but what it represented. Still largely a mystery, the mark was one more thread connecting her to the magic, knowledge, and power of the ancient elves. She looked at the chest by her bed that contained the shattered pieces of the orb. Solas had known more about the orb than he’d intimated, that had become increasingly clear to her. He may have actively prevented her from finding the truth. But he was gone now and the orb destroyed. Perhaps the Vir’abelasan held more answers about the orb and the mark it had branded on her flesh.

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Cullen spent the next two days worrying. The Inquisitor had remained in her quarters, refusing all visitors. Only the healer and a servant had been permitted entry into her chambers since he’d left. Cullen had pressed both for news and been given curt updates on Ahrue’s wellbeing: she was fine, just tired and in deep thought, very quiet. He recalled his own period of despondency after Uldred’s vial corruption of the Ferelden Circle Tower. Cullen understood why she didn’t desire company, and he feared that she would do as he had done ten year before and leave without a word in the middle of the night, desperate to escape the site of her trauma. If she would see him, he could tell her how little running actually helped.

Leliana and Josephine had pressed him for details when they’d heard that he, Varric, and Cole had
been up in her quarters for several hours. He’d told them gravely of the Despair demon and the Herald’s triumph but had kept other details to himself. The Inquisitor was right, the rumors would eventually become widespread, but he would not hasten them. He wished he could shield her from the slanderous judgment and gossip that would undoubtedly circulate as her condition became well known. Priests were not known for being particularly charitable in their consideration of unwed mothers, and elves were particularly vulnerable to the unjust slurs and abuse of the self-righteous. While a human in her place might be thought a victim of a cruel lover, an elf in the same position would have her virtue called into question. Even if one of the Inquisition’s own took the sunburst throne, minor clerics still held sway over the thoughts of their congregations. Ahrue would lose the respect of the most conservative Andrastians, and the injustice of that fact vexed Cullen.

He knew what Leliana and Josephine would say once they caught wind of the pregnancy. The simplest solution is for the Herald to be wed, Josephine would argue. Her position and influence will make it easy to arrange an agreeable match, even in light of the less than ideal circumstances. No, Leliana would counter, we should forge the documents so it appears she was married well before the child was conceived. Her relationship with Solas was well known after their dance at the Winter Palace. We need simply claim that he was her husband. A few careful bribes, and a cleric and some witnesses could be convinced to attest to the fact. It is unlikely that Solas will come out of hiding to object. Cullen sighed. He’d prefer to just handle whatever blowback may come and glower at any who would speak ill of their Inquisitor. Better to make a stand in support of her and risk the rumors than to bend to the opinions of fools at her expense.

There was a knock at Cullen’s door, jolting him out of his thoughts. “Come,” he said loudly.

Mason, the messenger Cullen had stationed to the great hall with instruction to keep him alerted about the goings on around the Inquisitor’s quarters, entered the room. “Commander, Sir. The Herald has left her chambers, looking pale but otherwise well. She is coming this way. I ran ahead to alert you.”

“Thank you, Mason. You’re dismissed,” said Cullen. The young man bowed quickly and scampered off while Cullen set about tidying his desk and smoothing his collar.

He felt easier knowing she was out of her chambers, but his stomach twisted at her imminent arrival. He had been perhaps too overt in his affection for her at their last meeting, and he’d felt her shy away from him when his eyes had lingered on her face overlong. It was apparent that she did not return his admiration, and he had no desire to make her uncomfortable with unwanted expressions of affection.

It was several minutes before he heard her knock at his door. He’d started to grow worried that she’d gone back to her quarters or become ill again on her way. But there was the familiar rhythm of her knock, albeit a little softer than usual. “Come in,” he said warmly.

She stepped into the room, looking, as Mason had reported, a little pale and tired, but not particularly ill. “Commander, do you have some time?”

He smiled. “Of course, Inquisitor.” He gestured toward the chair on the other side of his desk. “I hope you are well.”

She took the seat. “Thank you, Cullen, I’m fine. Though I practically drowned in the sea of well-wishers that accosted me on my way her.”

“Yes, we’ve all been eagerly awaiting your emergence. The people have much love for their Inquisitor.”
Ahrue fidgeted in her seat, looking like she wanted to bolt. “I have something important to discuss with you.”

Worry gripped him and he frowned. “Alright.”

She took a deep breath. “I’ve decided to leave the Inquisition.”

Cullen’s heart dropped. It was as he’d feared. He tried to keep his expression calm and sympathetic, but his body tensed involuntarily.

“I’ll remain for a short time to make my departure as smooth as possible for you and the others, but I hope to leave within the next two months. Sooner would be ideal.”

He stared at his hands, trying to gather his thoughts, trying to think of the right words to convince her to stay. He heard her drumming a fingertip on the arm of the chair, waiting for him to say something. “…he began, looking briefly into her eyes and then back at his hands. “I understand why you would want to leave. Everything that has happened… Everything that’s ahead… I’m sure it’s hard to feel at ease here. But I speak from experience when I say that running from your past, running from the judgment of others, it doesn’t help.”

He heard her exhale slow and deep, and he looked up to see her staring past his head through the window. “Cullen. Kirkwall might not have worked out, but running is what brought you here. And I believe you’ve found some small measure of peace. Sometimes running is precisely the answer, it just matters where you run to.”

True enough, but not what he wanted her to take away from his personal history. “You plan on returning to your clan, I assume?”

“No. I have other plans.”

He thought he caught her meaning. His muscles and his voice twinged with tension and jealousy. “Tell me you don’t intend to go after that elf apostate!” She raised an eyebrow, and he closed his eyes with the instant realization of his misstep.

“No, I am not pursuing Solas,” she said venomously. “But it would be my business if I was.”

“I… I’m sorry, my lady,” he stammered. “You are right. It would be understandable if you wanted to locate him and entirely your prerogative.”

The irritation in her face was palpable as she continued in a slow steady voice. “I have a journey of my own planned, unconnected to the Inquisition, the Dalish, or Solas.”

He furrowed his brow. “A journey? To where?”

“I don’t know.” She looked down at the mark on her hand. “The anchor, the Vir’abelasan, both are a part of me now. But I know so little about either. I need to find answers.”

Cullen’s eyes widened. The Well of Sorrows. He wished, not for the first time, that she had let that witch Morrigan drink. As little credence as he gave Elven mythology, this geas the Inquisitor was under put him ill at ease. The more they knew about it, the better. Perhaps there was a way the geas could be lifted. But Ahrue should not delve into the matter alone. “Surely the Inquisition’s resources can help you with that,” he said brightly. “We can send agents and specialists in Elven lore to the Temple of Mythal and...”

“No.” she said firmly. He could see the tension in her jaw and neck. “The sacred places of my
people have endured enough intrusion. If I go, it will be as a disciple of the old ways. If I sent the forces of the Inquisition, they would be there to plunder secrets and mine knowledge they have no right to. What is ahead of me, I must do alone.”

He shook his head, unbelieving. “Alone? I understand if you don’t want the army of the Inquisition breaking down the doors of Elven ruins, but surely you don’t plan to travel alone.”

“I do.”

He felt the panic rise as the picture of what she was proposing became clearer. Cullen came around the desk to stand over her. “You cannot. Listen to me, my lady. You are with child, you have been ill and despondent for weeks, you have been tortured by a demon, and you are mortal! You cannot set out on your own to meddle in ancient and dangerous magic. The journey by itself would be taxing in your present condition, never mind if you encountered hostile forces.” He slammed his fist onto the desk. “I won’t allow it!”

Ahrue’s hands tightened into fists that shimmered faintly with magic as she looked up at him, eyes flashing. “Step back, commander,” she warned.

He quickly obeyed. “I… I only meant…”

“I know what you meant.” She sighed. “I know you want to protect me, Cullen, but I don’t need or want that protection. My health, my state of mind, and my ability to take care of myself are not your concern. And none of this is up for debate. I am telling you that I am leaving the Inquisition. I am telling you I will take this journey alone. The only matter on which I seek your council is how best we might prepare for my departure. Are we clear?”

Her words stung, but he felt the justice in them. She was not a child to be protected from the dangers of the world. She knew the dangers of what she was facing, probably better than he did. It was her judgment and her choices that should guide her, not his. “It is clear, my lady,” he said softly.

The Inquisitor stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. “Believe me when I tell you I have to do this. And try to have some faith in me. I am not exactly a stable boy trying to fight bandits with a wooden sword,” she smiled.

He smiled back with a tinge of sadness. “Do you think you will ever come back?”

She shook her head. His heart sank. “You will be… greatly missed,” he said, both fearing and hoping that she would grasp his full meaning.

She took her hand off his shoulder and turned toward the door to leave. “I’m sure the Inquisition will carry on just fine without me.”

He laughed dryly. “Don’t count on it.”
Departure

Over the next month, the Inquisition prepared for Ahrue’s departure. It was announced that the Inquisitor had been called away to attend to matters of a personal nature, and that Commander Cullen would be serving as Interim Inquisitor while the Inquisition, chantry, and various governments assessed whether or not its continued presence was needed to ensure the stability of Thedas. The response to the news was mixed, especially in light of the rumor that the Inquisitor was with child and had been asked to leave at the behest of the newly elected Divine Victoria in order to save face for the Inquisition. For many, Cullen fit their image of what an Inquisition leader should be, and they were grateful to hear that the Dalish apostate would be returning to the wild. Ahrue’s inner circle was less pleased.

"Why now?" Varric asked when she’d told them that she would be leaving within the fortnight to explore the ruins of the Dales. “The Elven ruins have lasted for centuries. You think they’ll turn to dust in the next few months?"

“I can’t explain it Varric,” Ahrue said, “and I don’t expect any of you to like it, but it’s important that I go now. I feel this urgency, and every time I think about putting it off…” She didn’t want to finish the sentence by telling them the truth of how painful and debilitating the whispers would become when she tried to resist them. “Perhaps Mythal is directing me, or maybe it’s the Well itself. I just know I need to go.”

“Goading, guiding, the whispers wail and she falls, remembering the shape she is supposed to take,” said Cole.

“This is stupid!” Sera whined “Elven ruins are stupid! You drank some ancient demon bath water, and now you’re chasing after Sad Face and his gang of mopey old elves? It sounds daft don’t it?”

“It does,” Ahrue acknowledged. “But whether or not it makes sense, the Well could mean a lot for our people if I could just learn to understand the power and knowledge it gave me. Abelas and the Sentinels are my best chance.”

Sera moaned dramatically. “Do you have to be so… frig’n elfy!” She threw a cup at the wall as she fumed.

“Uh, seriously boss,” Bull said, “The Chargers could clear you a path right up to the front doors of whatever Ruin you want to dig into and wait outside until you’re done. In, out, onto the next one.”

“I agree,” said Blackwall. “If this is something you must do alone, then at least let us see you there safely.”

She took a deep breath, trying to keep her patience as she explained. “Blackwall, do you remember at the Temple of Mythal, how I had to do the rituals to honor Mythal and the Sentinels. It didn’t make sense to us, but it mattered.”

He nodded gravely.

“This is like that. I have to walk this path alone or I won’t be worthy of the Well’s gift or the answers I need.”

“But how do you know?” pressed Varric.

She frowned. “I know. The Vir’abelasan doesn’t make much sense to me, but it does let me know
when I’m on the wrong track, and every time I’ve thought of involving others…” she winced as the whispers pounded behind her eyes. “I can tell that it won’t work.”

Dorian gave her a worried glance, opened his mouth as if to say something, and then thought better of it, twirling his moustache instead.

“How long do you expect this to take?” Varric asked. “Because, in case you hadn’t noticed, you’re really working against the clock here.”

The group’s invasive eyes settled on her abdomen. The change was barely visible, even unclothed, but still they looked. “It will take as long as it takes. I’ll deal with it.”

“Deal with it?” said Blackwall. “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Dirthara-ma,” she mumbled under her breath, temper rising. “It is not your concern, or anyone’s concern but my own.” She stood and held up her hands. “Talk it to death if you like, but I’m done having this conversation. Goodnight.” She walked off without a backward glance, knowing they would continue to discuss her in her absence. She knew their words came from a place of caring, but she was so tired of going in circles with everyone, biting her tongue as she braced herself against their uncomprehending remarks.

She was pushing the door of her chambers open when she felt a hand on her arm. She turned to face Dorian.

“Inquisitor,” said Dorian. “Fancy some fresh air?”

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. “No more of that nonsense, I hope,” she said, nodding in the direction of their comrades.

“Ah, no. I promise to keep the paternalistic condescension down to a minimum. Well, except when entirely called for in the service of wit, that is. But I’ll be sure to wink so you don’t miss the irony.”

She smirked. “Alright come on up.”

They walked up the stairs, through her chambers, and onto the balcony. It was a cloudy night, and only a few stars could be spotted in the black-grey sky. The cool air felt nice against Ahrue’s throbbing head. She closed her eyes and smiled.

“Now there’s an expression I haven’t seen in a while,” said Dorian. “You looked almost happy just then.”

“It happens sometimes, usually in the breaks between conversations about me.”

“Ah,” said Dorian wincing. “Then I hope this won’t be too miserable for you, because you’re precisely the topic I wanted to discuss.”

She rolled her eyes. Of course. “Tell me you’re not here to pester me about the dangers of halla riding while pregnant.”

“Ha! Hardly! You can throw the rat to a pack of hungry nugs for all I care.”

“Wow.”

“I jest. What I really mean is that whether you choose to ride horses, fight dragons, poke about in
ancient ruins, or cloister yourself in your quarters until the child arrives, as far as I’m concerned, you are the only person who should have any say in the matter.”

She felt great warmth for Dorian in that moment. “Thank you. I appreciate that more than you know.”

“May I ask though, without any judgement: why choose to keep it? Surely there are herbs or rituals that could have… taken care of the issue. Why put yourself through all of this?”

She took a deep breath, letting the cool night air calm her habitual irritation at personal questions lately.

“You don’t have to answer if you prefer. It is idle curiosity and entirely none of my affair. But please, for my piece of mind, tell me that your choice wasn’t inspired by some sentimental nonsense concerning the cur who fathered it.”

She shrugged. “So what if it was?”

“Well, then I’d have to lecture you about how undeserving he was of you and how you owe him nothing, least of all sentiment.”

“This isn’t about Solas.” She leaned on the banister and took another deep breath of the mountain air. “Promise you won’t judge?”

He smiled broadly and his eyes twinkled in the lamp light. “Cross my heart.”

“I think I can use it to find answers about the Well.”

Dorian gaped. “Now that I was not expecting. You finally surprised me, Inquisitor. Do you plan to sacrifice the child to the old gods? Trade it for passage across the waking sea?”

“Sounds like you’re judging,” Ahrue said grinning tightly.

“Joking. Sorry, I forgot to wink.”

“It’s nothing nefarious, and it may be silly. It’s more of a feeling than anything concrete. There are all these little things that I sense are somehow connected. Just days before drinking from the Well, I was camping in the Emerald Graves investigating the Red Lyrium trade. While there, this feeling came over me, like a humming in my blood. I felt connected to that place, to the elves who died there, to the Emerald Knights of Din’an Hanin. And this rush of desire hit me, almost a compulsion to bring life to that place. I turned to Solas, and I could tell he felt it too. I counted the days; that was the night we conceived. And then a few days later, I’m the first person in centuries who is granted permission to drink from Mythal’s Well. Mythal: the goddess of motherhood, among other things.”

“I’m not sure I entirely follow the dots you’re asking me to connect here.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure I can even connect the dots. But, I feel like all these little pieces are connected even though it’s difficult to see, and if I cut one of them off, maybe I’ll lose my connection to the Vir’abelasan, or I won’t be able to find the answers I’m looking for.”

He leaned against the wall and twirled his mustache. “So, what you’re saying is that the Well or Mythal wants you to keep your baby.”

“Well it sounds stupid when you say it like that. What I’m trying to say is, I think there is a pattern
to everything that has happened to me: the orb, the anchor, my pregnancy, the Vir’abelasan, the Graves and the Wilds, the ancient elves, the elven gods, even Corypheus! It all fits together!” she sighed. “I just can’t see exactly how it all fits.”

“If you’re right, the Maker is a far more organized fellow than I ever would have guessed.”

She glared at him.

“Allright,” he laughed. “Maybe not the Maker, but somebody certainly had their hands in all of this!”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s the nature of our world to tend toward patterns. Like snowflakes.” Dorian looked deep in thought. “This isn’t really what you came to talk to me about, though.”

“Allright?” He asked absently. “Oh! Yes!” His expression shifted to a smile of great warmth. “I just wanted to say that everything you’re doing… I think you’re remarkably brave. It takes courage and great strength of character to leave behind everything you’ve known and walk your own path, especially when everyone around you is telling you you’re mad to try. You told me something like that once. It meant a lot to me then, and I hope it means something to you now.”

Ahrue smiled. It meant a lot. “Ma serranas, ma falon.”

“As for me, I’m going back to Tevinter once you leave. I think most of us will leave. Without you here, it just won’t be the same. Iron Bull will likely stay until the Inquisition stops renewing his contract, though.”

Ahrue cocked her head. “Is that a problem for you?”

Dorian laughed. “A problem? Only of the most physical sort.”

“Liar.”

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It was late at night. The great hall was deserted save two guards on watch and Varric. Varric sat at his usual place beside the fire, reading letters from home. Hawke had sent word that she’d returned to Kirkwall from Weisshaupt Fortress after getting the Warden’s settled there. Fenris had apparently caught up with her on the road after receiving Varric’s letter concerning the happenings at Adamant, none too pleased about her leaving in the first place. Varric bet there was a story there. Isabella was in port, and Hawke teased that they might sail away with her to become raiders of the open sea. Daisy had also written, very curious about the Dalish mage Inquisitor and the Vir’abelasas. Varric had remained vague on the topic and hadn’t mentioned the mirror in his letter to her. Better to leave some things in the past.

Varric sighed. He missed them, even Aveline. He closed his eyes and imagined them all drinking ale at The Hanged Man over a game of wicked grace. It would be good to be home again. For all the Inquisition had achieved, all the friends he’d made, it wasn’t home, it wasn’t family. Buttercup had already left for Denerim, and Blackwall was talking about heading to Weisshaupt himself, but planned to wait until the Inquisitor had officially stepped down before starting his voyage; he still hoped she could be convinced to stay. In two days, Varric and Dorian would head off to the coast together, each to catch ships to their respective home lands.

Varric wasn’t sure what Cole planned to do. Varric had tried to convince him that he could follow the Inquisitor and help keep her safe without her even knowing it. Mythal and the Well couldn’t
really object if Ahrue didn’t even know about it. But Cole had said something cryptic and creepy, and Varric had let the matter go. Hopefully the Inquisitor could continue to count on her divine luck to keep her alive. He wouldn’t want to write her eulogy. She would be leaving the following afternoon, heading toward the Emerald Graves on halla-back with little more than a bedroll and a staff. She’d grown increasingly irritated by the apprehensive glances and furrowed brows from her friends at Skyhold, and most had learned to bite their tongues. She’d been firm that nothing would prevent her from leaving, but still people hoped.

He looked up from his letters at the sound of a creaking door at the other end of the hall. Ahrue stood just outside her door, looking at him. She was dressed for travel and carried a bedroll, her staff, and a pack. It was still dark out. Everyone had expected to have a chance to say goodbye in the morning, but she looked like she would be ducking out early. Varric got up and they walked toward each other. He put his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. “Taking off?”

She looked toward the great door. “Yes. I left a letter. It will be easier this way.”

He snorted. “Maybe for you.”

She shook her head. “For everyone. They’ll all try to convince me to stay again. They’re probably preparing their best most heartfelt arguments as we speak. When I tell them no, it will hurt. They’ll feel like they failed or like I don’t care about them.”

She wasn’t wrong. He knew Josephine had an impassioned speech planned, and Blackwall intended to meet her in the stables to make one last go of it. Iron Bull had toyed with idea of leaving an hour ahead of her with the Bull’s Chargers to clear the road of any bandits or dragons. It seemed Cullen had resigned himself to her imminent departure, restricting himself to pleading looks and brooding sighs, but Varric wouldn’t be surprised if he were moved to make a declaration of love in the heat of a heartfelt goodbye.

Ahrue stared down on Varric. “Well, you caught me. Let me have it then.”

He laughed. “Me? I’ve got nothing! I wish you would stay, at least until after the nugget is born, but I know the way this story goes. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

She smiled and her eyes danced in the firelight. “Ma serranas, Varric.” She hugged him. “Dareth shiral.”

The Inquisitor walked into the night. Varric leaned against the threshold of the hall watching the main gate. A few minutes later, she appeared, leading her halla. She turned to him and waved, and she left.
Ahrue’s skin tingled pleasantly. The fade was thin here. The halla she rode trotted over to a nearby tree and began rubbing her horns on the bark. “Yes,” Ahrue said, stroking the halla’s neck, “this will be a good spot to camp.” She’d made camp in this spot roughly four months before when the Inquisition had come here to investigate reports of red lyrium. Now the Inquisition forces were gone, and this part of the Graves was deserted. She dismounted and lifted her light packs from her mount’s back and hung them from a nearby tree. The halla had been sent as a gift from her clan after they’d received her letter telling them that she would not be returning. She’d told them that she felt called to devote her life to studying the ruins and knowledge of the ancient elves in places too dangerous for the clan to follow. She’d left out the details of the Vir’abelasan and her pregnancy. It was less painful for them and her that way.

The halla was young and strong. Ahrue remembered assisting in her birth two years before. She’d been the one to name her Dirtharavas. The letter that had arrived with the halla said that when the tender asked the herd who would be willing to aid Ahrue in her travels, Dirtharavas stepped forward and bowed her head to the ground. The tender believed the halla had remembered that Ahrue had shown her compassion and care when she was small. Dirtharavas was a welcome companion, and Ahrue was grateful for her aid.

Ahrue kept her load light for the halla’s sake. She foraged for food and water when she needed it. And she carried only a small supply of medicinal supplies, potions, and the like. She was a competent enough alchemist that she could forage the ingredients and make more of anything she needed. It had made for slower travel, but she thought it important to not overburden her companion with extra supplies. Her one indulgence was the broken remains of the orb that she’d wrapped in a satin scarf and placed in the bottom of her pack.

Ahrue stretched, arching her back to loosen the tension that had settled there during the ride, and took in the ecstatic beauty of the Emerald Graves. Everything was vibrant and colorful, as though light emanated from within. The rest of Thedas paled in comparison. There had been some rain as they’d rode in, and every leaf and blade of grass glistened brightly with the rain water. She breathed in the peaty, sweet scent of it. The Graves had remained imbued with vitality in the centuries that had passed since the ancient elven wars. She could feel the life and death of the place pulse in her blood, sending chills through her. The whispers of the Well fit harmoniously with the old songs of this place.

She unfastened her cloak. The rain had dampened it, and she wanted to find a place to dry it in the sun that now shone brightly through the parting clouds. Nearby, a wolf statue of Fen’Harel was pointed away from where she would soon set up camp. She walked over to it and pressed a hand to the stone, focusing her magic to add to the heat of the sun-warmed surface. The rock was dry and hot. She spread out her cloak on the statue’s back. Ahrue walked around to face the statue and smiled. “You don’t mind, do you Fen’Harel?” The statue stared back at her passively. She’d always liked the intelligence of Fen’Harel statues; there was curiosity in those eyes, a trait she identified with. “We are two of a kind you and I. Both of us deceive our kin, and both of us must stand apart.” She stroked the statue’s nose with one hand and the small swell of her belly with the other. “I wonder if it was you who comforted me in my dream of the waterfall. Was it you who whimpered in my lap while I cried into your fur? Maybe you saw that we were alike and felt sorry for me.”

The statue was overgrown on its north side with moss and arbor blessing. Ahrue tilted her head and considered the statue. “How about as a thank you for drying my cloak, I’ll make you look
handsome again.” She began clearing away the plants, making a neat pile of arbor blessing at the base of the statue. She could use that later. She made a list in her head of all she needed to do before the sun would set.

Travelling, camping, foraging, it was all familiar. But the solitude was new. She’d been surrounded by others her entire life. As a First in her clan, she’d been taught to constantly prioritize the needs of the group. “You belong to more than just yourself, Da’len. Vir adahlen. Together we are stronger than one.” How many times had the Keeper and Ahrue’s grandfather repeated those words? It was a lesson she’d carried with her to the Inquisition. Even among humans, dwarves, and Qunari, she felt a responsibility to the group and a willingness to depend on the skills and knowledge of others. But now she followed a new path: the way of sorrow, Vir abelasan. A lonely path. The voices of the Well did not object to Dirtharavas’ company, but Ahrue wondered what lay ahead once her child was born.

She believed the child was part of her path, but she could not guess at if and when that path would fork, sending her and her offspring to travel different roads. She thought of Kieran. His birth had been calculated by Mythal to deliver her the soul of an old God. If Ahrue’s intuition was right that the conception of her child was connected to the Vir’abelasan, the anchor, Mythal, and the ancient elves, among other things, what ultimate purpose would it serve? But maybe she was wrong. Maybe her belief that her pregnancy was connected to a larger constellation of interrelated events was just a desperate attempt to separate her child from the painful memories of Solas and her failure as a Dalish, a hope that her grief had some greater meaning.

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Din’an Hanin was quiet. All around Solas were the signs of the uneasy passage of time: collapsed walls where intricate mosaics had once glittered in the candlelight; rashweed overgrown on the tarnished statues; the delicately woven banners had long sense been eaten away by moths and the elements. And, of course, there were the dead. The entombed corpses dated back centuries, while bodies of unfortunate travelers, tomb robbers, and soldiers decaying under rubble or slumped against the walls spanned the years since. Violence and death had worn the veil thin there, but Ahrue’s efforts had strengthened it some. Hopefully the dead would rest on this particular visit; Solas didn’t relish the thought of disturbing the slumber of the deceased, let alone fighting off walking corpses by himself.

He heaved a sigh of exhaustion at the sight of the rubble. If the artifact he was searching for was here, it would undoubtedly take a great deal of digging to exhume it. But he would do what must be done. If it wasn’t here, he would move on to the next ruin, and the next. Surely at least one arulin’holm would have remained in working order and out of Tevinter hands. And wherever it was, Solas would find it. He had sacrificed too much to be defeated by a broken mirror.

He tensed at the persistent temptation to return to Skyhold and ask Ahrue to use the Inquisition’s spy network to find one of the artifacts. With the Inquisition’s connections, they could probably locate the artifact within months, probably find it gathering dust in a magister’s private collection, the owner completely ignorant of its use. Solas closed his eyes. No. He would not use the Inquisitor or her resources any further. Regardless, even if he were to attempt to persuade her to help him, the trust was gone. Their last meeting in the fade had made that clear. He recalled her expression when he’d turned to meet her face, hurt and angry. “You knew?” she’d asked him. More of an accusation than a question. He wasn’t sure precisely which pieces of the puzzle she’d been able to put together or what knowledge she was accusing him of having. He’d kept so much from her, it hardly mattered. In the months since, she had not sought him out in the fade, so it seemed clear she was decided against him. It was better this way, better that she stay out of his reach so that he might resist the myriad temptations she awakened in him.
He breathed deeply. Even at this great distance, staying away was difficult. Partly it was his fault. Of all the ruins he could search, again and again he chose to tread in the places that were alive with memories of her. Even as he pushed her repeatedly out of his waking thoughts, dreams recalled the times they had shared in these places. The entire forest seemed to sing with memories of their night together in the Emerald Graves. He could choose to explore ruins that she’d never touched, but when he considered it, he found himself unwilling to let go of those few faded connections to her. They were all he had left, and most likely all he would ever have, of Ahrue Lavellan. Just thinking of her made sleep pull at him, made him want to sink into memories and all the pleasure and pain they brought.

He did need to sleep, but he would have to resist the urge to dream of Ahrue. The spirits in the area and the ancient memories of Din’an Hanin could give him some hint as to where he might find an arulin’holm, saving him months of digging in the rubble. He had higher obligations than nostalgia.

Solas looked around for a relatively level bit of ground. He brushed aside some bits of stone to clear a space for his bedroll. His hand bumped into something smooth. He regarded the object: an iron bark carving of a halla, with intricate etchings on its sides that depicted the story of Ghilan’nain and the hunter. He remembered the figurine. Ahrue had found it in a buried tomb in Ghilan’nain’s grove in Dirthavaren. Her face had brightened when she’d picked it up. She’d tenderly blown the dirt from its crevices, a gesture that Solas repeated now. Then her expression had grown distant as she’d stared at it. Solas had put a hand on her shoulder to ease the homesickness that the figurine had inspired. She’d smiled faintly and stashed the carving in her pack. Weeks later, when they’d searched Din’an Hanin, she’d discarded it to make room in her pack for a more practical item she’d found in the rubble. He recalled the sad expression that fell across her face as she’d gently placed the halla on the floor. Sentimental as Ahrue was, practicality always won out.

Solas frowned looking at the figurine. He imagined another world in which he could bring this to her, perhaps place it on her pillow. Her face would light up seeing it there, and she would laugh in surprise and delight as she clasped the small thing to her heart. In another life, he could have spent his days bringing her joy instead of pain. Why not this life? She’d asked him that once, and he’d repeated the question to himself every day since their parting. Solas bent over to open his pack and removed his spare tunic. He unrolled the clothing and placed the halla at its center before rolling it back up and returning it to his pack. Foolish.

He spread out his bedding and reclined on the floor, using his lumpy knapsack as a pillow, half hoping he wouldn’t be able to stay focused on his purpose, that he would be drawn back to their night together in the Graves. He was already in a deep sleep when the Venatori mages set about dispelling his wards.
Ahrue knelt on the ground where Dirtharavas had been snuffling. She parted the weeds to find the tops of a cluster of wild dale root and smiled as she began clearing the top soil. She took hold of the base of the leaves, wriggled the plant as she pulled, and in a few seconds, she managed to work a dirt-caked, deep red root out of the damp ground. It had been a long time since she’d had fresh dale root. It didn’t grow in the Marches where she’d spent most of her life, and the starchy, bitter, domesticated variety that humans grew in Ferelden and Orlais was a far cry from the sweet tender thing that grew wild in the forests of the dales. She’d had the vegetable only a couple times in her life, and was eager to share the treat with Dirtharavas at their evening meal. She stashed the plant in her pouch before beginning the task of unearthing the others.

She’d never dug up dale root before, but her hands went about the task with skill and confidence, as though she’d spent every day of her life uprooting the stubborn plants. When she had been in the Graves before, she’d felt a connection to the place, but it was removed from her, like remembering a story. Standing here now, she felt as though she knew this place as surely as she had known the mountains and woods her clan had frequented when she was a child. She felt at home here in a way she never had at Haven or Skyhold. She belonged here. At the same time, she felt disturbed by the startling emptiness of it. There should be people here; the market should be open; the bell of Din’an Hanin should be tolling. Foreign thoughts would flit through her mind: “Edran would be glad if I gathered him some Prophet’s Laurel;” “Malani will be wondering where I am.” For a moment, these musings would feel completely normal, and she would begin gathering the Laurel for Edan, or heading to market to meet Malani. Then the disorientation would set in as she remembered that she’d never known an Edran or a Malani and that the market had likely been deserted for centuries.

It was the Well’s influence; she was sure of that. Some of the ancient elves whose knowledge she now possessed must have lived in these forests long ago. This place brought wisps of their memories and lives briefly to the surface. The effect was haunting. Ahrue was glad that the Well was responding to her change in residence. But those moments when she forgot briefly who and when she was were alarming reminders that she may yet lose herself to the voices of the well.

Still, the whispers were far more agreeable here than at Skyhold. The pain and vertigo were rarer here, and the voices, though remaining largely incoherent, had regained the nearly musical quality that she had experienced when she’d followed their path out of Despair’s grasp. She felt certain that she was where the Vir’abelasan wanted her to be. Or where Mythal wanted her to be. She wasn’t sure if there was any distinction to be made between the two. Did each voice of the Well have a will of its own? Did the Well force them into some joined consciousness? Or was their consciousness gone, lost to the overpowering will of Mythal? Ahrue shuddered at the implication these possibilities might have concerning her own will and pushed the thought away.

She finished freeing the last root from the earth and looked up at the sky. The clouds were streaked with orange. “We should be getting back to camp, Dirth,” she said, getting to her feet and rubbing the dirt from her hands. “I’d like to put up wards before the wolves come out.” She turned to look at the halla. Dirtharavas’ was frozen, her eyes fixed at a point to the southwest. Ahrue followed her gaze and slowly pulled her staff from its clasp on her back, while her other hand hovered near the hilt of her spectral blade. She stilled her breath and focused her senses in the southwest. The veil flickered; a mage was drawing magic from the fade less than twenty paces ahead, just on the far side of an outcropping of rock.

Ahrue followed suit, and pulled the energy of the fade around her like a protective cloak. Her
barrier sealed just as the mage stepped out of cover and sent a ball of fire right for her chest. Ahrue deftly grasped the hilt at her belt, channeling her magic through her arm and into the metal, bringing the blade into existence through the power of her will. She swung the blade into the ball of fire, deflecting it back at the mage who’d summoned it. He cried out as the fire hit the bottom of his robes, setting him ablaze.

Ahrue twirled to face the sound of crunching foliage at her back, sending a bolt of energy at the source of the sound. A strangled shout briefly sounded when the bolt connected with its target, whose hands stiffened around her drawn daggers as she vibrated in place for a moment before collapsing to the ground. Ahrue quickly closed the distance between herself and the screaming, burning mage, running him through with her blade. She waved her hand, focusing on slowing the energy of the air around her, shaping it into crystalline patterns, freezing the dying man and extinguishing the fire. She kicked his solid form, and he tipped to the ground.

Ahrue calmly focused her attention on the space around her, searching for further disturbances. All she could detect was Dirtharavas, bending to resume munching on the moss she’d been enjoying before the attack. Ahrue returned the hilt of her sword to her belt, the blade vanishing without her magic being focused through it. She braced herself against her staff as she bent to examine the remains of the rogue she’d killed.

She wore red leather armor. On the sleeve, a patch depicted a fist clutching a serpent, the insignia of the Venatori. Ahrue removed a pouch from the rogue’s belt, and rummaged through it to find a piece of paper, unceremoniously balled up amongst a jumble of tiny vials that most likely contained poison. She removed the paper, un-balled it, and smoothed it against the curve of her staff. The message was in a hurried scrawl, written in Tevene. She groaned. Tevene wasn’t her strongest language.

She sat down on the ground and began going through the message word by word, translating as best she could. “Lavellan” stood out immediately. She turned to the corpse and rolled her eyes. “Still trying to kill me? How’d that work out for you?” she mumbled before returning to her translation. Next her eyes fell to the words “Din’an Hanin” written as she’d seen it in other human script. As far as she could put together, the message was from one scouting party to another, informing them that Lavellan was in Din’an Hanin, as expected. The recipient was asked to continue scouting the area in case Inquisition forces were nearby.

Ahrue narrowed her eyes and scratched the side of her face. Why would they report that she was in Din’an Hanin? Unless her Tevene was rustier than she thought, this message was either a deception, or, for some reason, the other scouting party thought she was in the tomb. She turned to the halla. “What do you think, Dirth? Should I check it out?” Dirth looked at her and snorted. “Okay,” she said standing up. “Why don’t you go back to camp? I doubt the Venatori will bother you if you’re on your own.” Dirth snorted again and turned toward camp while Ahrue set out in the direction of the tomb.

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Solas woke when the metal toe of an armored boot collided with his ribs in a jolt of cracking pain. “Get up!” a deep voice shouted at him in a smooth Tevinter accent. Solas opened his eyes to find himself surrounded by large armed humans. Two were garbed in the robes and armor of the Venatori while others wore the heavy plate of the Templar order. He noticed the faint red haze that hovered around the Templars like wisps of smoke and felt their presence shut him off from the fade, holding him in a focused sphere that prevented him from summoning a protective barrier or attacking. The man who’d kicked him was a mage, dressed in enchanter’s armor, a horned hood pulled over his head. Another swift kick met Solas’ ribs, and he gasped in pain. “Where is she,
“Where is who?” Solas asked slowly, clutching his broken ribs as he tried to sit up. Another kick from behind made him shout out in pain. Even as he asked the question, he knew there was only one person they could mean. The Venatori obsession with Ahrue was unabated even now that Corypheus lay dead.

“Lavellan! We know you came here with her, now tell us where she is!”

Came here with her? Clearly they recognized him as one of her companions. Perhaps they assumed that his presence indicated that she must be nearby. “I have not seen the Inquisitor in months,” he replied with as much dignity as he could muster.

The mage crouched down and a pair of arms grabbed Solas from behind, holding him in place. “Is that so?” the mage drawled, slowly pulling a small knife from his belt. “Strange then that we should come upon one of her companions in exactly the place we were informed we would find her.” The blade came up and the mage pressed the tip of it into Solas chin as he sneered, biting his bottom lip. “Don’t you think that’s strange?”

“I think, that your informant was mistaken,” Solas spat. “If you seek the Inquisitor, look to her fortress. I’m sure Commander Cullen will be happy to greet you.”

The blade pressed in, and Solas felt the blood blooming sharply beneath his chin. “Do you take me for a fool? We know Lavellan has abandoned the Inquisition.”

Solas fixed him with an icy stare. “Then you know more than I. As I said, I have not seen the Inquisitor in months, and I have not been in contact with her or the Inquisition since my departure.”

As he spoke his mind raced. Had Ahrue left the Inquisition? If she had, she would most likely have traveled north-east to the Marches where clan Lavellan was. He couldn’t imagine what might bring her to the Graves. Except for him. If she was there tracking Solas, he might have inadvertently been leading her into a trap.

The mage lowered his blade and stepped back, nodding to the Templar to his right. A heavy blow landed on Solas jaw. The force of the hit slammed him to the ground. “Now, I find that very unlikely, Solas. It is ‘Solas’ isn’t it? It is well known that you are her lover and father to the unborn bastard she carries. Do you expect me to believe that finding you here exactly where we were told to find her is a coincidence?”

The news hit him like another blow, but he pushed it aside. The Venatori’s certainty of his connection to Ahrue could be dangerous to them both. If they didn’t kill him trying to extract information, they would undoubtedly try to use him as bait. And despite everything that had happened between him and Ahrue, Solas believed that she would come for him if baited. He would not be used to do her more harm than he already had. He forced an incredulous grin. “I suppose you also believe that she has an army of dragons at her command and dances naked under every full moon? Like any public figure, the Inquisitor is a focus of gossip and speculation. We did flirt on occasion, and we enjoyed a very public dance at Hilam’shiral—which I imagine is the source of the rumors of which you speak— but the Inquisitor is Dalish, and she’d no sooner take a flat-ear to her bed than a human.”

The mage returned his smile, and nodded again at the Templar who grabbed Solas by the throat. He squeezed and Solas’ airway pinched shut. Solas instinctively clawed at the hand that strangled him. It did no good.

“Why are you here?” the mage drawled venomously.
The hand slackened, and Solas’ coughed painfully as his airway opened. “I… study ancient elven history… and magic,” the words struggled out. “I came here… with the Inquisitor months ago… I didn’t have time to… properly study the relics here then… so I came back… alone.” He fixed the mage with a stare of icy rage, wishing he could focus past the Templars to draw on the fade; He wanted to make this man burn. “That. Is. All.”

The mage nodded, and the Templar’s grip tightened around Solas’ throat again. “I will have the truth from you, elf. Or you will die.” The mage smiled crookedly. “Tell me, are you familiar with the mortalitasi? I studied in Nevarra for many years to command a certain sway over the dead. Picture it: your paramour arrives to find her beloved sleeping peacefully as he waits for her. But when she leans in to wake him with a kiss, he rips her throat out with his teeth.” He laughed. “What a perfectly romantic end!”

The world was growing dark as Solas made a final fruitless struggle to escape. Let her be far away, Solas prayed to no one in particular. And then, with far more conviction, let her come and make these shemlen burn. Let them die, screaming in agony, knowing that she is more than they could ever be. Solas almost managed a smile when Ahrue stepped, as though summoned, out from the archway at the top of the stairs in front of him. Seeing her standing there, the power of the fade flowing through her, it reminded him of the day they’d first met, the day he’d felt the world change. He had the vague sensation of being wrapped in a cool blanket just as everything went black.
Ahrue approached Din’an Hanin cautiously, not sure of whether or not to expect a trap. From the cover of the heavy trees, she spotted a single lookout, standing just outside the doors. Ahrue quickly sent an icy blast to freeze the lookout while remaining in cover. She emerged from the trees and approached the woman’s frozen form. Another Venatori mage. Amateurs, she thought to herself. Ahrue channeled the fade in a heavy distortion of space that shattered the lookout like a rock to a glass window.

She walked lightly through the open door of the tomb, hearing the murmur of men’s voices coming from a lower chamber. There was coughing and then… her heart raced and her breath caught in her chest at the sound of his voice. Solas. She peeked through an archway that led to a grand staircase and down into a wide chamber. At the bottom of the stairs, a Red Templar had Solas by the throat, while a Venatori with his back to her spoke to Solas too softly for Ahrue to hear. Two additional Templars and a Venatori rogue stood around Solas. The Templars were likely stifling the fade and preventing Solas from using magic. Either the Venatori’s words or the lack of air made Solas frantic. He began struggling, clawing, kicking to get free, but the Templar had him firmly.

She needed to act fast. At this distance, the Templars were not affecting her ability to draw from the fade; they were too focused on Solas. But as soon as they would become aware of her presence, they’d close in, and her magic would be disrupted. Solas looked injured, so she knew she couldn’t count on his assistance in the impending fight. Fighting without a team, she needed to be able to use magic fully, so the Templars posed a particular problem. A moment of disrupted focus could mean a quick death for her and Solas, and while she wasn’t sure how she felt about seeing him here, she was sure that she didn’t want him to die.

She reached into her pouch to pull out a jar of angry bees, magically held in stasis. She could use the bees to cause a distraction and break the Templars’ focus. She whispered a prayer to Mythal (more out of habit than true belief), and stepped through the archway. Before the Templars had time to react, she pulled the energy of the fade around Solas in a protective barrier, and threw the bees directly at the center Templar’s head. The jar shattered against his helmet, and the stasis spell broke, releasing a thick swarm of bees into the area. The Templar strangling Solas dropped him to the ground where he lay unconscious or dead. The bees set to work swarming into the Templars’ armor through eye slits, openings of the neck holes, and the spaces between slats of metal. The men shouted and swung at the air with their swords.

Staff in hand, Ahrue drew her blade from her belt and made for the mage who was now turning to face her. He didn’t have time to so much as shout before she swung her blade through his neck, and he crumpled lifeless to the ground. The Templars made for her, but the persistent nuisance of the bees, made their focus spotty. Even so, three Templars and a rogue against a single mage were not exactly favorable odds.

She thrust her arms forward and a telekinetic wave put the Templars and the rogue off balance and halted their advance. She took a deep breath and focused her energy, everything she could muster, through the anchor on her hand. She splayed her fingers, feeling the threads of the fade unravel at her touch, and then abruptly pulled her hand back toward her body, grimacing at the ripping sensation that signaled the opening of a rift. The rift wouldn’t do much damage to the Templars, but it would further draw their magic-stifling focus away from her.

The tactic was effective, and their hold on the fade loosened further. She wrapped a barrier around herself and run toward the group, spectral blade flashing. As long as they didn’t disrupt her magic,
Ahrue’s barriers were virtually unbreakable. For every hit she landed, her barrier replenished. The Templar that had strangled Solas swung his broadsword horizontally into Ahrue’s right arm. The momentum and weight of the weapon sent her stumbling in the direction of the impact, but her barrier held, and she regained herself quickly. She slammed her staff to the ground and smiled as the forking energy she summoned charged the metal in her opponents’ armor and weapons. While they shook in place, bracing themselves against the white hot pain cascading through their electrified nerves, Ahrue swung her blade into the shoulder of the rogue to her left. He screamed, fell to his knees, and Ahrue set him ablaze for good measure.

A hit from behind struck her left shoulder, the force causing her to drop her sword. She whirled around, using her staff to freeze the humid air, creating a short wall of ice between her and the Templars. She picked up her blade and rolled her wrenched shoulder to loosen the aching muscle while the Templars busied themselves hacking through the ice. She thrust her arms forward, toward the Templars, sending the shards of ice flying in a telekinetic wave into their faces. They shouted and pawed at their stinging eyes, and Ahrue swung her blade to cleanly end the Templar to her left with a cut to his neck.

The two remaining Templar closed in on her. When they drew close, Ahrue focused the space around her. The Templars’ movements become thick and slow in the distorted bubble of time she summoned. The one to her right lifted his sword above his head, while the other made to lunge. She stepped out from her place between them and around to stand behind the Templar on the right and released her hold on the fade. The slowness of their movements abated and the Templar to the left lunged forward just in time to catch the heavy downswing of the other’s broadsword in a quick fatal blow to his head. Ahrue deftly swung her blade to the back of the last Templar’s knees, slicing the ligaments. He fell forward, and before he could hit the ground, she froze him solid, so the collision with the floor sent his pieces scattering.

With the last Templar dead, Ahrue returned her staff to her back and shifted her focus to the rift she’d opened. With a wriggle of her fingers and a flick of her wrist, she sutured the rift shut. She turned to the crumpled form of Solas. He was very still. Ahrue steadied her breath and returned her hilt to her belt as she walked to where he lay on the broken, tiled floor. She knelt beside him and placed her fingers on his wrist, refusing to let her hands shake while she felt for a pulse. Nothing. She repositioned her stone-steady hand to try again. The slow beat drummed against her fingers. Her breath left her in a rush, an unexpected sob escaping her throat. Her legs, firm and strong a moment before, shook and buckled, and she fell to her hip. She hadn’t allowed the possibility of him being dead to impact her until she was sure he was alive. Now both the grief at almost losing him and the relief that she hadn’t hit her heavily.

She beat her fist painfully against the floor in punishment for still being so affected by him. He’d lied to her, used her, and abandoned her, and still she fell to pieces at the thought of living in a world that he wasn’t a part of. Foolish and sentimental. I should leave him, she thought to herself. He was out of immediate danger, and it would be better if she was gone when he woke up. But against her better judgment, she rolled him to his back and placed a hand to his chest. Closing her eyes, she let her magic consume her senses. From the point of contact, her focus spread out, and out, gradually taking in the inner workings of his entire body. She felt the bruised and battered jaw; the stab wound that passed through the base of his mouth, behind his chin; the barely open airway and throat bruised with large fingermarks where the Templar had gripped him; and the broken ribs.

Ahrue wasn’t much of a healer when it came to magic, but she was handy with more mundane remedies. She began rummaging through her pack to find the bandages and healing salves to tend to his injuries. A poultice for the jaw and throat would reduce the swelling, soothe the pain and speed the healing. A few stitches behind the chin would have to do for the stab wound. And she would need to bandage the ribs.
The ribs gave her pause. Not because she wasn’t confident in her ability to stabilize the area, but because tending to the injury required familiar physical contact. Still, the wound needed to be dressed. She took a deep breath, clenched her jaw, and gently rolled the bottom of his shirt up. She gingerly worked the tunic over his head and arms. Ahrue examined the wound with as much clinical coldness as she could manage. The skin was badly discolored near and around the break, but no bones had punctured the skin or lungs. She poured the salve directly onto the wound, and tried not to think about how warm and familiar his body felt against hers as she dressed the injury, how much she enjoyed the look of his lithe, lean form. She stepped back the moment she was done with her work and tried to slow her heart beat.

He looked uncomfortable on the hard ground. Dragging him to his bed roll didn’t seem like a good idea given his injuries, so she rolled up the thin mattress and positioned it behind his head. She applied the poultices to his jaw and throat and sewed up the stab wound. Once finished, she stepped back and admired her work. That was a little better. He would wake up in a while, hurting but alive. He could use magic to heal what she hadn’t. She wasn’t needed any further. She should leave.

The Well, so calm for the past week, rebelled violently against the idea of her leaving Solas, beating like a Qunari war drum behind her eyes. She sat down quickly in anticipation of the imminent dizziness. “I’ll stay. I’ll stay,” she whispered softly, and the Well receded. The Vir’abelasan had refused her the company of any of her comrades, but the whispers insisted on Solas remaining. She looked at him: familiar and stranger. Who was he really? Was he the deceitful monster the despair demon had shown her or the gentle lonely romantic she’d loved? Her reason told her that he was not to be trusted. He had deceived her, hid things from her, and abandoned her. But her heart still saw him as the man whose fingers trembled as he pulled an arrow from her shoulder, who kissed the tears from her cheeks, who marveled at her and admired her with an openness that surprised and delighted her. Whatever he was, she was ashamed to admit to herself that she missed him. She missed the light Northern brogue of his voice, his clever impish eyes, and his sad smile. She missed their long conversations and their long walks. She missed hearing him talk to Cole with such sensitivity, patience, and love. Like a father. Most of all, she missed how, with him, she felt like she’d found home at last.

Ahrue brushed the tears from her cheeks. Despite everything she loved and missed about him, the fact remained that he had left her of his own volition. Whatever he had felt or still felt for her, he’d chosen not to be with her. Nothing had changed. Well… something had changed, but she did not want him to stay out of obligation, nor did she want to subject her child to the fickle affections of a flighty father. Even if he woke up and begged her to take him back, she couldn’t really trust him to stay, not when she didn’t understand why he’d left in the first place. But he wouldn’t want her to take him back, she admitted coldly to herself. He would wake up, they would make pained conversation, and he would leave again.

She put her hand to her abdomen. She was still barely showing and didn’t yet look pregnant. Solas wouldn’t be able to tell with her wearing armor, and she wouldn’t disabuse him of his misperception. She could keep secrets too. But maybe he already knew. He might have sensed it in her as Dorian had, or heard about it through dreams or rumor. Or he might know her body so well that the subtle changes would alert him as clearly as a frank announcement. In any event, he would not hear it from her lips.

Solas moaned softly in his sleep, probably from the pain in his ribs or throat. For a moment, Ahrue relished his pain. With all the grief he had caused her, with her bearing the consequences of their dalliance while he could walk away again and again, only to come back into her life unexpectedly, he deserved a little pain. Why was he even here? Had he known she was coming? Had he come here to meet her? Or did Mythal or the Well have some purpose in pulling her to him? Of course.
The Well had rebelled when she’d thought to leave him, it made sense that it had also drawn her here to find him. Ahrue sighed. She had been open to following the Vir’abelasan when she thought it would lead her to old ruins, the sentinels, and answers, but she hadn’t planned on running into Solas again so soon. The wounds were still too fresh. And how long did Mythal and the whispers of the Vir’abelasan plan to force them together? If Solas woke up and decided to leave, would Ahrue be able to let him go, or would the throbbing whispers push her to follow him?

She grunted in frustration. This train of thought was leading her nowhere. She was subjected to the will of Mythal, and fretting about it would accomplish nothing. Ahrue decided that she needed to focus on something else. She was tempted to search Solas’ pack to find out what brought him to the Graves. Creators knew he wouldn’t give her a straightforward answer if she asked. But being a private person herself, she balked at the thought of invading his privacy. Besides, her longing to know his reasons for leaving and his reasons for being in the Graves had more to do with wanting to be told than wanting to know. The Venatori corpses were another matter however. She had not yet searched the bodies for information or useful supplies. Ahrue crouched beside the dead mage and rifled through his robes. A small scroll, stained with red sealing wax was tucked into an inner pocket. This message was in the common tongue, thankfully.

Magister Brutes,
The Inquisitor is bound for the Emerald Graves, alone. Heard her whispering about exploring ancient Elven ruins with her friends. Also can confirm that earlier reported rumors are true. She will leave Skyhold within the fortnight. I trust I have fulfilled my debt to you.
Signed,
G

A spy in Skyhold. The message looked like the ones carried by Leliana’s birds. Ahrue would need to get word to the Inquisition. Fenedhis. She didn’t want to go back, not with how firm she’d been that she needed to leave immediately, and the slight throb behind her eyes told her the Well wouldn’t allow her to travel back anyway. Maybe she could get a messenger bird at a nearby town. Or perhaps Leliana still had scouts in the area. She spat on the dead mage. “You and your friends have caused me a lot of trouble. You’re being very poor losers,” she said dryly.

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Solas slipped into unconsciousness, and the world of the fade blossomed around him. He was lying naked on the cool, damp grass. The warm humid air and his recent physical exertion made the chill of the ground a pleasant counter balance. The stars shone brightly over the Emerald Graves, and the full moon cast everything in an unearthly glow. The weight of Ahrue’s head rested comfortably on his chest, her face pressed to his skin, and her arm draped across his body. His own hands were folded behind his head.

He looked down at her sleeping form and smiled. Everything about her surprised and fascinated him. She had felt the songs of this place, the pull of it, just as he had. Most elves, even the Dalish, were removed from their connections to the old magic that permeated this world. They had forgotten themselves. But Ahrue was different. She felt the land, the spirits, the stories, the language, all of it in her blood. She didn’t always understand it, but she felt it, and approached it with curiosity and openness. She could be taught, and the elvhen essence within her could be awakened.

“Your heart sped up. What are you thinking about?” she asked.

He bent his head forward to kiss her hair and wrapped an arm around her. “I thought you were asleep.”
She sat up and faced him with a sweet smile, those intelligent eyes he loved so much flashing with curiosity. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Solas propped himself up with one hand, and took her hand with the other. “I was thinking of you, of course. How special you are. How unique.”

“How beautiful, how brilliant, how powerful, how charismatic,” she continued, batting her eyelashes.

He laughed deeply. “Yes, all of that, and more.”

“You’re very lucky to have me, you know,” she teased.

He raised his eyebrows. “Do I have you?”

She shrugged. “It’s an expression. A little like, ‘I felt the world change.’”

He smiled shaking his head, pulled her to him, and kissed her. “I am fortunate to know you, Ahrue. And having you in my life has been worth more than I ever could have imagined.” He stroked her cheek softly with the back of his hand. “Ar lath ma, vhenan.”

She smiled at him, but the laughter faded from her eyes.

He searched her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. Everything is perfect.” She put her hand to his heart. “You are perfect.”

He pressed his hand into hers. His skin prickled pleasantly as the thrum of the anchor pulsed against his chest. But Ahrue looked distant, her gaze wandering to the horizon. “Vhenan,” he said, gently turning her face toward him. “Tell me.”

She exhaled slowly and then fixed him firmly with her gaze. “What happens next?”

“What do you mean?”

“The Inquisition won’t last forever, Solas. Eventually, Corypheus will be dead and order will be restored. What will you do after this is over?”

Solas frowned. He couldn’t answer her. Not really. “I suppose I will continue on as before.”

“Sleeping in ruins and exploring the fade?” she frowned as she asked.

“Yes.”

“I see.” She stared at her hand, still pressed to his heart.

“And you will return to your clan, yes?”

“Hmm?” she looked at him vacantly.

“You’ll return to clan Lavellan once your work with the Inquisition is complete?”

“Oh,” she shrugged. “I suppose. It will be strange, though. Going from being ‘the Inquisitor’ of Thedas back to being the First of clan Lavellan.”

He couldn’t imagine it. He could hardly imagine her ever having been the First to a Dalish Keeper.
He wondered, not for the first time, what she had been like as a child, an adolescent, a young adult before the Conclave. How had the Dalish crafted her into the astonishing woman he loved? Had her people recognized how remarkable she was? If so, did that fact fill them with fear or pride? What did they think of her time as the Inquisitor, let alone her role as the Herald of Andraste? Did they see her actions as a devaluation of their ways or as a boon for elves everywhere? And how could she return to being an apprentice to a Keeper of a small clan of wandering Dalish after a year of commanding the respect and fealty of nations? Could such a life still bring her satisfaction? Stepping back into her position as First to the Keeper of clan Lavellan, would be a difficult transition for everyone.

Then he imagined himself moving on with his life after the Inquisition. If he managed to get the orb from Corypheus, he would need to find a way to channel enough power to open it. And then Solas, like Ahrue, would be stepping as though into his past, unsure of where he fit after so much intervening time. If he failed to obtain the orb, there would be a price to hold off the inevitable for a few centuries longer. The price was rightly his to pay, but Ahrue changed everything. Giving up his life was one thing. Giving up a chance for a life with her was something else entirely.

He’d tried not to think of the future. Better to focus on the tasks at hand and enjoy their time together, however brief it may ultimately be. But over the course of his months with Ahrue, it had become harder not to think of her as a permanent part of his life. This, however, raised many difficult issues. Not the least of which was his true identity. He’d laughed ruefully at the thought of that conversation on more than one occasion. She had mentioned that she liked the statues of Fen’Harel and appreciated the warm curiosity in the wolf’s eyes, however Solas suspected that discovering she’d been sharing a bed with the Dread Wolf would still give her pause. But shelving that particular discussion, if he managed to recover his orb and use it, would she be willing to become elvhen? He knew she would be equal to the task; she was born to be so much more than a Dalish Keeper or even an Inquisitor. Together maybe they could prevent the past from repeating itself. But would she even support his decision to unlock the sanctum? He would be asking her to take a lot on faith.

And if the orb could not be recovered, if Corypheus had polluted it beyond use and the price had to be paid… maybe he could find another way, some way to renew the sanctum’s seal without requiring a sacrifice. And they could walk away. Maybe go to the Dalish. If Ahrue had shown him anything it was hope that The People could find themselves again. They may never be what they once were, but if they could become anything like Ahrue… maybe they could be taught to retain the best of the past while looking ahead to new ways of being in the world.

Whether or not the orb could be saved, Solas could imagine the brightness of the future only when Ahrue was in it. When he thought of a life without her, he saw the past repeating itself. He saw himself dying alone, sacrificing himself to forestall the inevitable for a few meager centuries. He closed his eyes against the very old fears that pushed heavily on his thoughts.

He felt her hand on his cheek, pulling him back to the present. “Solas, what is it.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her face, radiant in the light of the full moon. “I cannot bear the thought of my life without you,” he said, an unexpected tear running down the side of his face.

She smiled softly, and tenderly traced the wet trail left by his tear with the side of her index finger. “You don’t have to, vhenan.”
Ahrue tried fruitlessly to sleep on the hard floor. Besides her small travel pouch, all her supplies were back at her own campsite, and, as tempting as it was, she was not so cruel as to rob Solas of his blanket or bedroll currently bolstering his head. She thought about going back to her campsite to get her equipment, but the walk to and from would take at least an hour, and she didn’t want to leave Solas unattended for so long with Venatori in the area. So she busied herself studying the room. She’d been here before months ago, but now, with the whispers of the Vir’abelasan, she understood more of what she saw. When she closed her eyes, she could see Din’an Hanin as it once stood. It had not always been a tomb. Long ago, followers of Elgar’nan had worshipped and meditated here, later it became a stronghold of Dalish warriors, and then, after the Second Exalted March, a tomb. Now it was a broken ruin.

The history of Din’an Hanin was the history of the elves: once contemplative and devoted with a cultural heritage that stretched back millennia, then warriors, then victims of human imperialism, then fragments of a lost past, rubble at the feet of those left standing. Now in the forests of the Emerald Graves, for every Dalish statue, there were two devoted to Andraste; for every elven ruin, there were three Shemlen estates. Insult to injury.

She stared at a broken mosaic. Many of the tiny metal squares that had made up the once dazzling image had been chipped away by time or thieves. But Ahrue could still recognize it as depicting the Dalish myth of Elgar’nan restoring his father, the Sun, to the sky. An older story shimmered hazily at the edge of Ahrue’s consciousness. She saw a heated argument between father and son; the feud initiating a civil war that shook Elvhenan; the fires in Arlathan killing many and leaving thousands more destitute; Mythal and Fenaril interceding and a peace being brooked on the condition that the father would abdicate his throne to Elgar’nan in one hundred years; and in the meantime, Elgar’nan lending his support to his father’s regime, reluctantly helping him rebuild the empire.

Ahrue furrowed her brow. This ancient and heavily mythologized story was not far off from what had transpired in the recent political feuds she’d… moderated in Orlais: family maneuvering and plotting for power while their people suffered and died. How little things change, and how disheartening that her own people had been so base. But who was this “Fenaril?” The name did not appear in any of the stories she’d grown up with. As far as she’d learned from the old myths, it was Mythal alone who had convinced Elgar’nan to restore his father to his place in the sky. She tried to focus on the name, repeating it softly, “Fenaril, Fenaril, Fenaril.” But the voices of the Well receded, and she was left with only a headache as a parting gift. She sighed. A mystery for another day.

“You’re here!” said a strained, rasping voice behind her.

She turned to see Solas, propping himself up on his elbows, gapping at her with an expression that she couldn’t quite interpret. Seeing him awake and talking to her was jarring, but she resolved to not let it show.

She walked to his side and crouched next to him. “I’m here,” she said, pushing him gently back into a reclined position. “Don’t try to sit up. I’m not much of a healer, and you’re basically being held together with bandages and thread right now. When you’re stronger you can finish the work that my poultices couldn’t.”

He obeyed, and relaxed his head back into his rolled bedding, but his eyes remained transfixed on her face.
She reached for her water skin to give herself an excuse to look away from him. “Here,” she said uncorking the top and extending it. “You should drink.”

Again he obeyed, and still he stared. He took a few pained sips of the water before returning it to her. “Ma serannas,” he said. His voice was barely recognizable through the hoarse rattle of his bruised throat.

She took the water skin and placed it beside him in case he wanted more later on. She fixed her gaze to the floor, and they passed several moments in silence. She didn’t know what to say. She was flooded with conflicting feelings and questions that she knew he wouldn’t likely answer.

He broke the silence first. “The Venatori were here looking for you. I thought they had been mislead.”

“Yes, I’m sorry you got caught up in this. It seems there is a spy in Skyhold who told them I was headed here.” She fumbled in her pouch for the messages she’d taken off the bodies and held them out to Solas. “When they found you here instead, they must have thought…”

Solas nodded stiffly. “They thought we were here together.” He took the messages and reluctantly broke his gaze from her face to read the text.

Ahrue focused on keeping her breathing calm and steady and balled her hands in fists to still the trembling that threatened to betray her. This was easier when he was unconscious. Talking to him, seeing his facial expressions, it was so easy to fall back into old patterns of familiarity.

Solas set the letters down, and returned his gaze to her face. “You truly have left the Inquisition then.”

“Yes. I’m done posturing for humans and Chantry-folk. It served its purpose, but now that Corypheus is dead and… It just couldn’t be home to me anymore.”

“But why come here? And why alone? Were you seeking me?”

“No!” she said abruptly.

An inscrutable expression ghosted across his face and was quickly replaced by curiosity. “Then why?”

“The Vir’abelasan. Skyhold is too layered with history and my own memories of the place. There the Voices of the Well are just a cacophony of incoherence.” She didn’t want to say that the Well was killing her there, or that remaining there was too traumatic after all that had happened after Solas left. “I thought I might be able to make better sense of the Well’s knowledge if I traveled other places, ruins that still stand, more or less. Maybe places where the people who became part of the Well once walked.”

The corners of his mouth and eyes twitched into a familiar expression of surprised approval. “Very likely. Have you succeeded?”

She nodded. “A little. A stray memory here and there. A vision. An old story.” She pointed at the mosaic she’d been studying. “It tells the story of Elgar’nan. I grew up knowing the myth well, but here I can sense that it’s based on an older history of a civil war that almost destroyed Elvhenan after Elgar’nan tried to depose his father.”

He beamed at her. “I’m impressed! You understand the Vir’abelasan with much more clarity than I would have expected so soon.”
She shrugged, trying to conceal the pleasure that his admiration brought her. “It’s just a matter of standing in the right place. I have no control over it.”

“You give yourself too little credit, vhen—Ahrue.”

They each blushed at the easy slip into familiar intimacies and looked away from one another.

“Ir abelas. I will be more careful with my words,” he said. “It is not easy for me to…”

“I know.”

He shook his head, and grimaced against the pain, either physical or emotional. “I’m not sure you do.” His expression softened. “You remain very much in my heart. Being apart from you has been…”

Ahrue’s temper flared, and she held up her hand in a halting gesture. “Stop. Don’t do that. You left!” How dare he talk to her about how difficult this has been on him? He knew nothing of what she had been through, what he had cost her. “Whatever pain your choices caused you, it was of your own making. And it is yours to carry.”

He closed his eyes and nodded. “Ir abelas. You do not have to remain. Thank you for dressing my injuries, but I can tend to myself.”

She stood up. “Ma nuvenin,” she said coldly and turned to leave. She was halfway up the stairs when she heard him call out.

“Wait. Please,” he said with a note of desperation. She turned to meet his pleading gaze and outstretched arm. “It is not as I want it. If being here with me is more than you can bear, then do as you will without regret. But, I…” His voice faltered. “Please stay with me, for a while longer.”

She sighed. She wasn’t sure what would be harder: leaving or staying. But when she took another step to leave, her head throbbed in protest and she felt as though an invisible hand halted her. She froze and pressed her hands to her eyes. Mythal apparently remained firm on Ahrue remaining with Solas. “Fine. I’ll stay,” she said weakly.

He exhaled heavily in relief. “Ma serannas.”

She returned to her place on the floor beside him. “What should we talk about? I’d ask you why you’re here, but would you give me an honest answer or just more lies?” Ahrue was surprised by the venom in her own voice, but Solas simply nodded thoughtfully as though granting the justice of her anger.

“I can’t tell you everything. But I will say what I can. I am here looking for an ancient artifact.”

Ahrue’s anger softened some as her curiosity spiked. “What kind of artifact?”

“It is a small blade used to repair magical items. Relatively common in the days of Arlathan, but it seems to be lost to time.”

Ahrue raised an eyebrow. She remembered reading of such an artifact in her studies under Keeper Deshanna. It was originally thought to be a wood crafting tool, but was later discovered that, in the hands of a skilled mage, it could be used to focus magic to restore enchanted objects. “You mean an arulin’holm?” she asked.

Solas started. “You know of it? From the Vir’abelasan?”
“No,” she smirked wryly. “I know of it from being raised by the Dalish. Not everything has been forgotten and lost. There are numerous relics that have been salvaged and preserved by the Dalish clans. Each clan has custody of a few. The arulin’holm is one such relic.”

Solas sat up, apparently unmoved by the pain in his ribs and neck. “Your clan has an arulin’holm?”

Ahrue shook her head. “No. Clan Sabrae has the only one, if I remember correctly.”

“Do you know where Sabrae is located?”

She did. Leliana had kept track of the movement of Dalish clans. On last report, Sabrae was in the Free Marches a few days west of Kirkwall. But they would not give a flat-ear the relic willingly. Only a Dalish had the right to petition a clan for the use of a relic. The desperate note in Solas’ voice worried her. To what lengths would he be willing to go to obtain the relic? “What do you want it for? Are you hoping to repair the orb?”

He laid back, frowning. “The orb cannot be repaired.”

She held out her hand in a gesture for him to continue. He was quiet for a while, and Ahrue felt certain that he was calculating what he could tell her that would both satisfy her question and secure her help without revealing too much. She folded her arms. “Tell me the truth or you’ll get nothing from me. And I’m sure you know it could take you years to find the clan without my information.”

He sighed. “Very well. The Eluvian in the Temple of Mythal. Corypheus shattered it. I would see it restored.”

“You? The Vir’abelasan was the key to that Eluvian. I’m the only one who can activate it.”

He shook his head. “A single Eluvian can be the entrance to multiple doors, each with its own key. You opened one door, I seek to open another.”

It made sense. Morrigan’s Eluvian had once led them to the Crossroads and later had led them directly into the fade to meet Flemeth. Solas was giving Ahrue more information than she’d expected, but she was skeptical. “For what purpose?”

“What Corypheus tried to do, what the ancient Magisters did, others will try, and eventually someone may succeed.”

She nodded. Dorian had voiced a similar fear after they had returned from Adamant Fortress. Perhaps it was this drive to invade heaven that inspired the Venatori to continue their pursuit of her; the anchor was still their best chance at entering the fade physically.

Solas continued. “The only way to prevent it with certainty is to destroy the inner door, to permanently seal off the Golden City. The Eluvian in the Temple of Mythal can be activated to lead someone directly there.”

Ahrue wasn’t expecting that. “How do you know all this?”

“The fade.”

She sneered at him. “You sure get a lot of traction with that answer. Try mixing it up a little. Tell me you heard it from a one-eyed dragon-wrangler in the Anderfels.”

His mouth twitched in a brief smile. “I read it in a book.”
“Was it a fade book?”

He chuckled, but his joviality quickly faded. “Does it really matter how I learned of it? I am certain of its truth.”

“Why do you need this particular Eluvian? There are others.”

“As far as I know, all the Eluvians that lead to the City are broken.”

“If it’s the only way to get to the Golden City, why not just leave it destroyed?”

“Someone else could find a way to repair it, or there could be other keys like the orb. The only reason Corypheus failed is because you had the anchor. If you hadn’t taken it from him, he could have used the orb and anchor together to create a rift that led him to the Golden City directly. I cannot guarantee that no other such relics remain. But if I can repair the Eluvian in the Temple, I believe I can permanently seal off the Golden City so it cannot be accessed through any means.”

Ahrue bit her lip thoughtfully and narrowed her eyes. Was he telling the truth? If he was, then surely she should help him. But perhaps he knew her well enough to craft exactly the right lie to guarantee her cooperation. “Is this why you wanted the orb in the first place? To use it to destroy the entrance to the Golden City?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that when we first found out about the orb?”

“That… is complicated. But, in short, I suspected that my claiming a desire to enter the Golden City would not be well received by most members of the Inquisition.” He looked at her with intensity and frowned. “And, it would raise more questions than I was willing to answer.”

She snorted. “And now?”

His eyes softened. “There is still much I cannot say. But I swear to you that what I propose is necessary for the safety of the world.”

She looked down at her left hand where the anchor faintly glowed, remembering her encounter with Despair, and her increasing retrospective intuition that Solas had known far more than he’d ever let on about the orb and everything else. “You always knew didn’t you?” she said calmly, not expecting an answer. “You knew Corypheus had the orb, you knew what it did, you knew what the anchor was. You kept it all from me, and you’re still keeping things from me.”

His face fell. “It is necessary,” he said quietly.

She saw him in double: the man who loved her and the man who deceived her, the person she trusted above all others and the person who could play her as skillfully as a bard at his lute. She could see only one way to proceed, and she felt ill at the thought of it.

She shrugged helplessly. “I really can’t risk not helping you. If you’re telling the truth, the City ought to be sealed.”

He heaved a sigh of gratitude and relief. “Ma serannas.”

She held up a hand. “Don’t be so quick to thank me. I also can’t risk that you might be lying. You’ve played me before, and I would be a fool to think you wouldn’t do so again if it served your purpose.”
The muscles of his mouth and jaw tightened slightly. “What do you propose then?”

“I’m coming with you.”
Solas was dumbfounded. A moment ago Ahrue had been desperate to leave him, and now she was proposing traveling at his side. “Are you certain?”

Her face was set in stone. “Yes. I will take you to clan Sabrae. It so happens that only a Dalish elf can evoke vir sulevanan to petition for the use of an ancient relic, meaning you will need me anyhow. After we have the relic, we will go together to the Temple of Mythal to repair the mirror, and then you will tell me how to seal the inner door to the Golden City. And I will enter the mirror and seal it alone.”

He hated himself for lying to her again. She could not likely enter the sanctum—the mirror would only respond to an elvhen; if she entered the Eluvian, it would take her to the Crossroads—but at the moment, agreeing to her terms seemed to be the fastest way to obtain the arulin’holm and reach the sanctum. Always a few shades off from the truth. He couldn’t risk her refusal, and the lie was more believable and more sympathetic than reality. He hoped someday she would recognize that all the lies he told, all the times he used her, it was all for the good of the world. And she was the most important part of that world. “Ma nuvenin,” he said stiffly.

She smiled thinly. “Good. Now, have you recovered enough to do some healing magic?”

He tensed. “Are you hurt?”

“No. But you are.” She laughed.

“Oh. Yes, I’ve been healing gradually. The bones should be knit by morning. Thank you for tending to me and rescuing me from the Templars and Venatori. If you had not arrived when you did…”

“It was my fault they were here anyway,” she said with an icy edge.

He wished he could say something to soften her. She was angry, understandably so. But he could tell that she still had feelings for him, which made her all the angrier. Once she had loved him without reservation, now she was repulsed by the tenderness of her feeling. The way she looked at him, he suspected she would carve her heart out if she could. Not so long ago, he’d been able to calm her, to bring a soft smile to her lips, with just a few words or a gentle touch. Now he was the reason for her anger and pain.
And he was perhaps the cause of more grief than he’d originally realized. The Venatori had said she was with child. The thought made his chest tighten. The Dalish’ strict customs around romance and procreation were not kind to those who conceived outside of the bonding. He hoped the Venatori was wrong. It could have been idle gossip, speculation about why she was leaving the Inquisition. Or the mage might have crafted the story for his benefit, to solicit a response from Solas, a tactic of interrogation. But if the Venatori’s information was true, it meant Solas had brought shame and alienation to Ahrue’s life in addition to heartache and betrayal. Was there no limit to the damage he could do to her? To the world?

And now he was using her again. He had vowed not to, had left to keep himself from causing more pain. But fate had thrown her back into his destructive path. Or was it Mythal’s will that had brought Ahrue here? Very cruel, old friend, he thought bitterly. For her part, Mythal had also left behind a trail of victims, roughly used tools that deserved better but served a crucial purpose, her daughter and grandson being the most recent. Thankfully Solas’ own offspring wouldn’t get the chance to hate him or suffer too much at his hands. The child would only have whatever stories Ahrue chose to share of him. Solas suspected she would be kind, even if her heart ached at the telling.

Ahrue rubbed her shoulder, wincing. She must have wrenched her arm during the fight that Solas had slept through. “Are you sure you aren’t injured?” he asked her.

“I’m fine. Just a little out of practice. Things have been quiet since Corypheus died. Today was the first real fight I’ve had in months.”

“You should rest. Where is your gear?”

“Back at my camp. It’s fine. I’ll stand watch tonight, and we can head back to my camp in the morning, once you’ve finished healing. I’ll get a couple hours of sleep there, and we can start toward Clan Sabrae.”

He wanted to offer her his bedroll, assure her that he wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway, but he knew it would irritate her. She was not one to appreciate chivalry or coddling, and in Solas’ case, she would no doubt suspect ulterior motives.

“Would you like me to roll out your bedding for you?” she asked flatly. “I would have done it before, but I didn’t want to move you around too much with your broken ribs.”
“I can manage,” he said calmly and set about spreading out his bedroll. Meanwhile Ahrue got up and walked to the mosaic she’d been studying when he’d woken up. Solas grunted at the sharp pain in his side that shot through him as he reached for his pack. He smiled sadly at the fact Ahrue didn’t turn around at the sound to see if he was alright. Perhaps she was in deep thought, or perhaps she was trying hard to care less about him than he knew she did. He laid back on his bedroll, his head on his pack, watching her.

“In the fade, did you ever learn anything of this story: Elgar’nan and the Sun?” she asked.

He remembered it well. “A little.”

“Did you ever hear a version that included Fenaril?”

He was startled to hear her say that name. He’d thought he’d heard her calling to him by “Fenaril” just before he’d woken up, but was sure it was the lingering haze of the fade blurring his senses. Now he wondered. It had been a very long time since anyone had mentioned that name to him; he’d thought it lost to time. But with the Vir’abelasan in Ahrue’s possession, there was the chance of many long buried memories being brought again into the light, for good or ill. He began hesitantly, unsure if her question was earnest or if she was toying with him, flaunting knowledge that he’d thought to keep from her. “How do you know that name?”

“While I was looking at this mosaic, the name came to me from the Vir’abelasan. The older story that predates the myth, Fenaril was a part of it. He helped Mythal.”

“Yes. He was the leader of the rebels, I believe. The people were suffering from the chaos caused by Elgar’nan’s and his father’s feud, and the rebels were planning to kill both men in an attack on Arlathan in a final attempt to end the war. Before the attack, Fenaril approached Mythal, who was far more reasonable than her mate, with the rebels’ demands. He explained to her what the feud was costing the people, and that if it did not end soon the rebels would be forced to destroy Arlathan in order to save the Empire. She listened. And together they arranged a truce between Elgar’nan and his father.”

Ahrue turned to face him, her eyes bright with understanding, and a slight smile turned at the corners of her lips. “Fenaril. Fen’harel.”

Solas’ breath caught in his throat. “What?”
“In the Temple of Mythal, you said that Fen’harel was once considered a god of rebellion. And now you say that Fenaril was the leader of the rebels. Are Fenaril and Fen’harel the same? Is that why his role in the story was erased? He saved Elvhenan by rebelling against Elgar’nan and his father?”

His panic abated, and Solas felt a rush of admiration, affection, and no small amount of gratitude. For centuries he had heard Fen’harel recalled with only venom and fear. But Ahrue lit up at the possibility that Fen’harel was actually a misunderstood hero, eager to recover Fenaril from the degradation of Dalish myth. “It is possible. The roots of ‘haril: to oppose’ and ‘harel: to deceive or betray’ may have been muddied in the millennia since the original events.”

“And I imagine that Fenaril’s rebellion on behalf of the people would have been perceived as betrayal from the perspective of the tyrants that rebellion threatened. Fen’harel’s tarnished reputation could have been a political maneuver orchestrated by Elgar’nan to deflate the rebel movement.” She laughed. “My grandfather would disown me if he heard me going on like this!” At the mention of her grandfather, Ahrue’s smile abruptly faded and she blushed.

“What is it, lethallan?”

She looked away. All signs of her excitement from a moment before had evaporated. “It’s nothing. I’m going to keep watch outside. If any Venatori reinforcements come, I’ll be able to see them coming from the battlements.” She looked at him with glistening eyes. “Try to get some sleep.” She turned, jogged up the stairs, and left his sight.

Solas closed his eyes. He wanted to follow her. He wanted to approach her on the battlements and say her name, to watch her turn, allowing him to see the tears in her eyes. He wanted to hold her, and feel her relax in his arms. He wanted her to tell him everything that had happened in his time away. He wanted to explain why he left and have her understand. He wanted to make it right.

Just a few short months ago, he’d been determined to build a life with her in it. He’d thought, once the sanctum was open, he could go to her in honesty, tell her the truth of who he was, everything he’d done, and why. And she would understand, and in time she would forgive. Then the orb broke, and he’d had to face the reality that there was no route to understanding and a future with Ahrue. Even if she could forgive his past actions and the inevitable consequences, the destruction that his pride hath wrought, the fact remained that Solas would have to pay the price. The seal could only be renewed through sacrifice. And, as the failure was his, the price should be his. But having Ahrue in his life again weakened Solas’ resolve.
The sun was rising. Ahrue felt completely drained. The battles of the day before and a sleepless night standing guard on the crumbling battlements had taken their toll. Her eyes were heavy and her entire body ached. No small part of her exhaustion was due to Solas. She felt sick at the thought of him. Dorian, Cullen, and Leliana had all, in no uncertain terms, warned her against seeking Solas out. And she had intended to follow their advice, as patronizing as it was. Not because she saw him as the villain that they did, but because she didn’t trust herself to see him clearly.

She didn’t know what to make of him. It would have been easier if he had changed in their months apart. If he had grown cold or cruel, if his straightforward admiration of her had given way to derision and contempt, she would have known how to respond to that. She might even have found some peace in that. But when he spoke to her, when he looked at her, she could find no change in him. This caused all her hurt and confusion at their parting to return. Why leave? Why lie? Why keep things from her? In his absence, she had been able to find some small degree of acceptance (or at least avoidance) of his baffling departure, but with him here, she found herself again wanting him to repair what he had broken between them.

Despair had left its mark on her, and her desire for reparation was overshadowed with an overwhelming terror that their former closeness may have been nothing more than a carefully calculated maneuver, that she was falling again into the trap that he had laid for her. There was a time, if he had told her that he’d wanted the orb to seal the Golden City, she would have believed him without reservation; she would have followed him on his quest for the arulin’holm certain that he would not lead her astray. Now, she was braced for betrayal. And not just from him.

Mythal would not let Ahrue leave. Even contemplating it made her head spin. On the stairs the night before as she’d moved to leave him, she had been incapable of taking another step, frozen in place until she agreed to stay. She had begun her journey, believing that Mythal wanted Ahrue to harness the full power and knowledge of the Well. The pull of the Vir’abelasan had felt like destiny, a weighty calling that she must not deny. Now, the voices of the Vir’abelasan were her chains, shackling her to Solas for whatever purpose Mythal deemed fit. Regardless of the Well’s influence, so far Ahrue felt sure that remaining with Solas was the wisest course of action, whether or not he was telling the truth. If Solas strayed from the plan he’d detailed, Ahrue would be there to stop him. If he was telling the truth, she would be there to enable his success. But should she ever find herself at cross purposes with Mythal, Ahrue would become the witch’s puppet, helpless to resist her will. She was trapped.

There was another issue that needed to be dealt with. The journey to clan Sabrae would take at least a month, likely longer. By the time she and Solas arrived, Ahrue would be well into her pregnancy and there would be no hiding it from him. She was tempted to say nothing, and let him struggle with whatever emotions his gradual suspicions and eventual realization would bring. Her silence would cut him deeply. A tacit testament to both the damage he had caused her and the distance that his betrayal had put between them. His pain would be just, but still only a shadow of what she had
endured and would continue to endure.

No, she corrected herself. Not justice. Vengeance. Hurting him would do nothing to ease all she had suffered. She remembered seeing Blackwall standing on the gallows, prepared to be executed for his crimes. *What function would killing him serve?* she had wondered. *He is not a danger any longer, and his execution will not revive the dead.* The pointlessness of human justice. She could not abide by it, so she’d taken the hit to her political reputation in order to have him returned to the Inquisition.

She’d gone to him after his exoneration and handed him a list of names.

He’d looked at her blankly. “Inquisitor? What’s this?”

“Names of five *living people* who Thom Rainier’s actions harmed,” she’d said. “Children who were left without a mother or a father because of what you did. People who served sentences for your crime. The list could be longer, but I thought this was a good start.”

He’d scowled at her. “Believe me, my lady, I already feel the shame of what I did. I don’t need a blighted list to know what I cost these people.”

“This isn’t about that. I exonerated you because I don’t believe you can make amends through your death. You being dead does nothing to change the fact that Nicole Soldat has to care for her two little brothers by herself because her father was killed by your men and her mother died a year later when she couldn’t afford a healer. But maybe you being alive could change something in her life for the better.”

“What could I possibly do to change that?” he’d asked incredulously.

“That’s for you to figure out. You could ask her directly.”

He’d scoffed. “I doubt she would want to see me.”

She’d nodded solemnly. “Then you will need to find another way. But do something to make your life count for *them,*” she’d said pointing at the list.
“Saving the world isn’t enough?” a hint of irony in his tone.

“No,” she’d said as she turned to leave. “I could probably do that without you.”

The good Blackwall did after Ahrue exonerated him, *that* was justice. He’d looked at the specific pain he had caused in the lives of the living victims and did things to make it better. And doing so had started to earn both him and his victims some measure of peace. He could never undo his crimes, but his actions gave meaning to the pain he had caused. He made it matter.

That was really what she wanted from Solas. She wanted him to recognize the pain his actions had caused and respond to it, repairing what he could, acknowledging what he couldn’t. And what still caused her the most pain—beyond heartbreak, beyond her pregnancy, beyond alienation from her people—was not understanding why he had done the things he had done. Even if his answers hurt, knowing the truth would cauterize the wounds that confusion had left open and bleeding since that night by the waterfall. Despair had seeded itself in that confusion, pulling at the threads of doubt that still surrounded her memories of Solas. Until she knew the truth, she could only imagine the pain worsening. Even if she managed to stop futilely asking herself *why*, the questions would eventually return to her in the voice of her child. *Who was their father? Why had he left? Did he love her?* Only Solas could answer these.

Ahrue heard the door to the tomb scrape open against the gravel beneath her, Solas stepped into view, his pack, staff, and bedroll strapped to his back. He was glancing around trying to find her. Ahrue swallowed hard to stifle the building emotions and called out to him “Up here!” She jogged to where the wall of the battlements met the slope of the hill and headed down. Solas met her at the base of the hill, and looked her over with what she fancied was concern.

“Are you well?” he asked cautiously, handing her the water skin she had lent him.

She nodded curtly and grabbed the skin from Solas, taking a long draft of water before fastening it to her belt. “Are you well?” she returned the question.

“Yes,” he said continuing to search her with worried eyes, no doubt picking up on the signs of exhaustion that weighed on her.

She gave his a quick glance to satisfy her own concern, trying not to be obvious about it. He did look well; the injuries from the night before appeared to be completely healed, and he was not favoring his left side. “Good. Let’s head to my camp.”
He signaled for her to lead the way, and they set out. “I regret that I cost you a night of sleep,” he said. “We can stay at your camp for as long as you need; there is no rush to begin our journey. A day or two will make little difference.” His voice was tentative. He was afraid of upsetting her with what she might perceive as coddling. He knew her well.

A day’s rest sounded good, but Ahrue suspected that sleep would still allude her; too much pressed on her mind. “I’d rather not lose a full day.”

“Ma nuvenin,” he said softly. He knew not to push.

“It’s going to take quite a while to get to clan Sabrae. I estimate a month or so before we arrive.” She looked at him and met his furrowed gaze. “Is that alright with you?”

“It… is not ideal. But I will manage. I am more concerned about you. You seem… uneasy in my company.”

“With good reason, I should think,” she snorted.

He nodded. “I understand. I hurt you, and you feel betrayed.” He caught her gently by the arm and they halted. Her skin heated at the tenderness of his touch. “Ahrue. Please know, I never meant you any harm, and I regret if being in my company deepens any injury I have caused you.”

How little he was aware of the extent of that injury. She knew her mind would be easier once she told him about her pregnancy; she could stop worrying once it was done. Or at least move on to new worries. She felt her skin redden and her hands begin to shake lightly as she prepared to speak.

He lowered his head to meet her downcast eyes, still holding her arm lightly. “What is it?” His face was lined with concern, and she couldn’t help but feel warmth toward him. “You’re trembling,” he observed in a voice that faltered with emotion.

“Solas,” she began unsteadily, her stomach twisting in protest. “There is something I need to tell you, but I’m having trouble finding the words.”

He closed his eyes and let out a slow, shaking exhale. “I believe I know,” he said weakly.
“You know?” Ahrue felt tears beginning to well up in her eyes against her will. Had he known all along after all? Had he left knowing? More questions.

He met her eyes. “The Venatori, while he was interrogating me, he mentioned that you were with child.”

The tears overflowed, streaking her face, and Ahrue nodded silently.

“Ir abelas,” he said in a cracking, barely audible voice. “Had I known…”

“You would have left anyway.” She said it with frank certainty.

His eyes widened, tears glistening there. “Yes,” he said in an agonize whisper.

She was startled by his honesty, and it hit her like a blow. “Why?” she asked incredulously.

“It was kinder than staying.”

She pulled her arm from his grasp. Kinder than staying? Kinder to whom? “Why?” she said again more forcefully.

He shook his head helplessly. “Anything I say will only raise more questions.”

“So what? You love when I ask you questions.”

He smiled weakly. “I do. But some answers might hurt you far more than not knowing. And ultimately the knowledge gleaned would serve no purpose.”

Lies. Her lips curled in a dangerous scowl. “Do not insult my intelligence, lethallin.”

He looked at her curiously.
She folded her arms. “What you just said, it sounds fine. And coming from someone else, I might even have believed it to be sincere. Wrong, but sincere. But this rubbish about knowledge serving no purpose? That is not what you believe. You told me of the vallaslin, gradually chipped away at everything I believed from my Dalish upbringing. What purpose did that knowledge serve except to alienate me from my heritage?” She shook her head emphatically. “No. You believe that knowledge matters, that truth has intrinsic value. And in my position, you would want to know the truth. Even if the knowledge hurt you.”

He said nothing. His expression was a mix of bafflement and contemplation.

“Am I wrong?” she demanded firmly.

He was quiet for a while longer. Opening and closing his mouth in several false starts. “No,” he finally said softly and looked almost surprised by the answer himself.

Honesty. “So I’m left wondering, again, ‘why?’ Why hide things from me when you believe that knowledge is valuable for its own sake? The only reasonable explanation I can come up with is that you dissemble and evade so that I’ll continue to do what you ask of me. And that both frightens and hurts me.”

He looked wounded by her words, but he did not object.

She snorted and shook her head. Still he had nothing for her. Her prodding seemed useless. “I can’t force you to be honest with me, Solas. But you needn’t worry about me not helping you. Mythal has forced me to your side, and I’ll continue to help you at her discretion, regardless of what you say or don’t say. So please drop the pretense.” She frowned. “You were right: I am her creature now.” The word was thick and bitter in her mouth.

Solas closed his eyes. His arms hung limply at his sides. He looked as tired as she felt.

“Come on,” she said and his eyes opened slowly. “Let’s get to camp.” She walked on, and she could hear him behind her following at a distance.

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Mythal was playing a dangerous game. Blood pounded in Solas’ ears as he followed Ahrue blindly
through the forest of the Graves. It was the geas that had placed her in his path. She had exactly the information and connections necessary to ensure his mission would be completed. He needed her. But Mythal, flaunting her control over his beloved, was not exactly endearing Solas to his old friend. Had she forgotten that there were two remaining elvhen souls that could restore the seal? If she continued to toy with Ahrue so roughly, he may be ultimately less willing to pay his debts when the time came. Reminding him that she had his beloved under the geas, was forcing Solas to consider alternative options more seriously than he had before. And if Mythal’s strategy of ensuring his arrival to the sanctum involved raising his ire, she may find the Dread Wolf had teeth after all.

He recalled the night before, when Ahrue had made to leave but had stalled on the stairs. He’d thought he was witnessing her grappling with her conflicted feelings. He’d thought he was seeing the evidence that she still cared for him against her better judgment. But it was Mythal’s influence forcing Ahrue to remain against her will, a slave to his cause. How soon Mythal had forgotten what crimes had earned Solas the title “Fen’harel” long before the sanctum was even dreamed of: the slave brokers found dead in their sleep, the strategic strikes against institutions that used indentured labor. Did she think he would be one to tolerate her hold on Ahrue? She put too much stock in their friendship.

In the distance he saw Ahrue arrive at her camp. A halla bounded out of the foliage to greet her, with an affectionate nuzzle. Ahrue stroked the creature’s neck and kissed the top of her head, smiling warmly. His rage softened somewhat at the sight of her. She was impossibly lovely, a vision of Ghilan’nain herself. He thought of the ironbark halla carving in his pack. A peace offering, perhaps? A small gift to show that her happiness mattered to him? No. She would not accept it on those terms. She would interpret the gesture as a diversion. And rightly so. She’d been clear; it was answers she wanted from him, not affection.

Ahrue spoke softly to the halla, too quietly for Solas to hear. The beast’s head snapped in his direction. Ahrue must have warned her of his arrival. The halla stared steadily at him as he continued his slow approach. A beautiful, loyal creature who clearly adored her mistress. Solas was glad Ahrue was not entirely alone after all, and he knew she had a special fondness for these elegant deer that had lived in harmony with the elves since even before the days of Arlathan.

Ahrue waved her hand over the small fire pit, and the kindling lit. She sat on the ground and began removing her lightly armored boots. By the time he caught up with her at the campsite, she was unfastening her breastplate, placing it with the rest of her armor in a pile next to her simple canvas tent.

Solas held out a hand to the halla, who snuffled his palm cautiously. Ahrue gestured to the deer. “Solas, this is Dirtharavas. Dirtharavas, meet Solas.” She spoke to him but she looked away, unwilling to make eye contact.
“Dirtharavas: quest for knowledge,” he said, translating the elvish into the common tongue. “A fitting name.” He patted Dirtharavas’ neck, and the deer relaxed.

“She is from clan Lavellan.” Ahrue said. “They sent her when they got my message that I wouldn’t be coming back.”

Without the armor, Solas could recognize the slight rounding of her abdomen. She was with child. The dreaded possibility now a reality concretized in his mind. In a life that stretched back millennia he had never fathered a child, never wanted to. Other concerns had been paramount. Even now, faced with the burgeoning presence of their unborn child, he could think only of Ahrue and the impact this had had and would continue to have on her life. His fault. He sat across from her at the fire, shrugging off his pack as he lowered himself to the ground. “You aren’t going back to your clan? Because you are with child?”

She shrugged. “To start. But really, I don’t think I’m a very good Dalish anymore. It’s not the right place for me.” Her expression was sad but matter-of-fact. “Your influence is to blame, in part.” He was gratified to hear no rancor in her frank accusation. “But mostly the Vir’abelasan. It makes me see the Dalish customs and mythology in a new light. The Elgar’nan story is a perfect example. I can’t become a Keeper knowing that Elgar’nan was a tyrannical politician and Fen’harel was a rebel for the people. Or that the vallaslin are slave markings.”

His throat tightened at the memory recalled, but he pushed it aside. “Why not? Perhaps your people would value the truth, as you do.”

“They wouldn’t believe it was the truth. They would see me as harellan, come to destroy their culture and taint the old ways with influence from the shemlen world.” When she said “harellan” her eyes darted to a nearby statue of Fen’harel.

A faint smile played on Solas’ lips. “Are you casting your lot in with the Dread Wolf, Lethallan?” he asked in warm tease, nodding in the direction of the statue.

She smirked. “I think he’s taken a shining to me. He watches my campsite and keeps an eye on Dirth when I’m away.” She laughed. It was good to hear. “I had this dream a few months ago--” She turned to Solas. The smile faded quickly and she blushed a little. “Never mind.”

Solas wanted to tell her. She wanted him to tell her. She had not been entirely wrong in her accusations earlier; it was more the fear of her response than the desire to protect her that prompted his continued deception. When he’d lied to her and the others initially, it was to prevent them from kicking him out of the Inquisition, imprisoning him, or killing him. Mythal’s hold over Ahrue
would prevent her from responding as such if she learned the truth now. He bristled at the thought. Mythal’s geas opened up the possibility of revealing all without the risk of global consequences but only deepened his more personal motivation for concealing his true self from Ahrue: he was afraid she would hate him.

Ahrue yawned.

“Please, lethallan! Sleep,” he said, suddenly remembering why they had come to her camp in the first place.

She shook her head. “I need to eat something. I’ll rest in a while.”

“I will prepare a meal. You will sleep!”

She fixed him with an irritated glare. He had made a misstep. He had pushed too hard, presumed too much. In her fierce independence, she was now likely to refuse to sleep entirely, just to make it clear that she was not his to tend to.

He course corrected as best he could. “You saved my life, tended to my injuries, and stood watch throughout the night while I recovered. Making you a meal while you rest is the least I can do. Please…” vhenan. He caught himself before the endearment slipped out, but he hoped she could see the word in the sincere affection of his expression. “Ahrue, allow me this. Vir adahlen.” Together we are stronger than one.

She rolled her eyes, but tossed him her pouch that bulged with edibles she had foraged, and she silently retired to her tent. She tossed and turned on her bedroll for only a few minutes, mumbling grumpily, before her breath grew slow and heavy with sleep. He remembered the comforting weight of her head on his chest, the warmth of her puffing exhale against his skin. She was so real.

Solas began sorting through the edibles, selecting what to use in the stew. He picked up a sprig of wild thyme from the pile and began removing the leaves from the stem. It was a small thing, but he hoped such actions might offset some of the pain his presence caused her. If Mythal was going to force Ahrue to be at his side, the least he could do was be helpful to her, as he had been in the past.

Solas’ hands stopped their motion of plucking the thyme leaves from their stem, and the plant rested limply in his palm. A thought occurred to him. Far beyond being a competent cook and watch-guard while she slept, Solas’ true contribution to Ahrue’s past endeavors had been his vast
knowledge. Although selectively disclosed, his understanding of the orb, Corypheus, the fade, and ancient history had all proved useful to the Inquisitor, and might yet benefit her. Ahrue had left Skyhold with the intention of understanding the knowledge and power of the Vir’abelasan, a quest that his own mission had derailed. Her plan to travel the Dales and ruins of the elvhen was sound; memory attached to places as much as to people; his own journeys in the fade attested to that fact. While she was not free to resume her quest, he could propose a route to clan Sabrae that would take them through places that were particularly rich with memories that the voices of the Well would respond to. He could help Ahrue recover the knowledge that lay dormant within her.

His pulse and breath quickened. How long before the Vir’abelasan would betray memories of him? Ahrue had already learned of Fenaril’s role in Elgar’nan’s foolish and bloody bid for power. She’d astutely connected the young rebel to the mythical Fen’harel. How long before, through memory, intuition, or intelligence, she came to understand who Solas really was, what he had done? Would she respond to such knowledge with mercy or contempt? And what conclusions would it force her to come to regarding his role in recent events?

He tensed his jaw and resumed his task of preparing the herbs. No, if she was going to learn about his past, it would be from him first. That was what she wanted: the truth. The memories of the Vir’abelasan may skew the past, even if their vision of events was more charitable than the Dalish’ had been to Fen’harel. Only Solas could speak honestly of his crimes and motivation, his ambitions and missteps. Even so, Ahrue would be right to judge him harshly, but powerless to act on that judgement.

No, he corrected himself, not entirely powerless. Mythal would not likely prevent Ahrue from voicing her feelings on the matter. And if she hated him for what he’d done, that judgement would cut more deeply than any action Mythal would suppress. He’d grudgingly accepted the Dalish’ hatred of him long ago, chalking it up to the corrupting influence of time on memory. But if Ahrue learned the truth and looked at him—not the ridiculous betrayer of myth rocking and laughing to himself in the madness of solitude, but actually looked at him—and felt contempt, saw him as a threat to her, their child, and the People, it wouldn’t matter if Mythal prevented her from raising a hand against him. He would be utterly undone.
Ahrue was too tired to argue, and if letting Solas clean roots and cut up herbs would get him to turn his eyes to something besides her for a while, then let him have at it. She didn’t expect to sleep, but an hour or so of being still and letting her muscles and eyes relax would do her good. She would be able to deal with Solas more easily once she’d rested for a while and had a good meal. She shifted a little on her bedroll, trying to find a comfortable position. Exhaustion won out and the events of the day became quickly hazy and jumbled. “I hope you know what you’re doing with that dale root,” she murmured quietly as her thoughts began to drift dreamily. Within moments of closing her stinging, strained eyes, Ahrue was sound asleep.

She hopped lightly from the Inquisition aravel, or whatever the human word for the inferior wheeled, horse-drawn thing was. The ground gave a little under her weight with a mossy springiness that she knew her feet would be grateful for. She felt a tingle spread across her skin, and the history of this place seemed to hum through her veins.

“Ungh!” Sera whined, jumping down behind her. “It’s all bugs and damp here! Why can’t the Inquisition go to proper places? It’s always ruins, swamp, ruins, cave, cave ruins, desert, desert ruins, bog, forest, muggy buggy forest.”

“Careful, Buttercup,” warned Varric. “Keep up that whining and I’m sure the Inquisitor will dig up a muggy buggy forest ruin for us to poke around in.”

“It’s like the air is sticky,” Sera continued. “Should air be sticky?”

Ahrue ignored them. She would take a lush forest over cobbled streets and stone walls any day. Solas stepped beside her and smiled at her ecstatic expression.

“You can feel it, can’t you? Our people were here,” he said softly.

“Yes! It’s extraordinary. Like a chorus singing. One moment the song is mournful, and the next jubilant.”

He nodded. “There has been much sadness and joy here. It is important to forget neither.”

She watched as Sera swatted at a bug on her neck. “Just the same, better to keep this conversation
between us. Let’s not give Sera more to whine about.”

His eyes flashed impishly and he raised his voice. “Can you feel it, Sera? Our people were here, and their spirits yet linger.”

“Ungh!” Sera groaned. “Can you shut it about dead elves?”

Ahrue jabbed a finger in Solas’ ribs. He tensed against her touch, trying to maintain composure. He met her grin with a glower. In private, he would have tickled her in return, but among their comrades he furrowed his brow in mock disapproval and cleared his throat. “Please, vhenan. Control yourself.” His precarious frown twitched as he spoke.

“I could say the same to you. Why goad her?”

“She should learn, whether she wants to or not.”

“Yes, hahren,” Ahrue teased.

He chuckled. But looking at her face, his mirth was quickly displaced by tenderness. He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “This place suits you, ma’arlath.”

“Daaw!” Sera called out. She pointed at the couple and other eyes followed. “Elfy loves Elfy!” she said in a sing-song voice. “Knew it. Would be cute, except it’s boring.”


Ahrue planted him with a kiss, and was met with more cheers and jeers from the crowd of onlookers. The kiss broke and she smiled. “It doesn’t bother me, Solas. The rumors began months ago anyway. Half of Orlais saw us dance at Halamshiral.” She searched his face. “Does it bother you?”

“No. I only worry how our dalliance might impact your reputation.”
“I think my reputation can take the hit of a scandal or two.”

“You are no doubt correct. It is astonishing to see how the humans exalt you.”

“Astonishing. That’s one word for it,” she grumbled.

He laughed. “I know you find it unsettling, but you should be proud of all you have accomplished. Your achievements will impact elves everywhere.”

She bristled at the thought of that impact. “For better or worse.”

He looked at her curiously.

She sighed. “I worry what the People will think of what I’ve done, how I’m changing things. I’ve become the very picture of a ‘respectable’ elf, completely palatable, for the sake of shemlen approval. What does that really accomplish for elves? Try as I might, I can’t imagine my clan approving. My grandfather used to call elves who behaved like humans ‘harellan.’ Kin traitors. I hate to imagine what he must think of me being the Inquisitor and Herald of Andraste.” She frowned. “Perhaps I am harellan.”

Solas winced. “Don’t say that. Whatever the Dalish may think of your actions, you are no kin traitor. If your people are too short sighted to see that…” He stopped himself, likely aware that he was treading too close to insulting her heritage. He too had been wounded by elves who put too much stock in tradition.

Ahrue smiled weakly and caressed his face. “On the bright side, if I end up an outcast, I’ll be in good company.”

He snorted. His response stung her a little. She wondered, not for the first time, if he envisioned their relationship continuing past the end of the Inquisition. They had not discussed their future, and it troubled her not knowing. Not growing up among the Dalish, Solas had different ideas about romance than she did. He’d been with other women before her, and left them easily enough. Why should she be any different? He loved her, but it was entirely possible that he had plans for his future that didn’t include her. She’d avoided asking him about his intentions so far; she was aware that she had no sense of the proper pacing of a relationship by non-Dalish standards, and didn’t want to seem inappropriately eager. But she hated not knowing where they stood.
He noticed the contemplative expression in her eyes, but perhaps misinterpreted its source. “It will be alright,” he said, tilting her chin up and kissing her softly. “Whatever the Dalish may think now, once Corypheus is dead and the sky healed, those outcomes will speak far louder than whatever social niceties you engaged in to meet that end. Your people will understand.”

She smiled, grateful that he was trying, but she remained unconvinced.

He grasped her hand. “Come with me, vhenan. I’d like to show you something.”

Ahrue let him guide her to a wolf statue near camp, overgrown with moss. It had a small offering dish affixed to its base. “Fen’harel!” she said laughing. “My grandfather used to scold me for playing on Fen’harel statues near our camps when I was little.”

“You played on statues of Fen’harel? You were certainly a bold child.” He sounded vaguely impressed.

She shrugged. “Not really. Just not particularly inclined toward superstition. I just always liked the look of them.” She considered the statue. “He never looked evil to me. Just clever and watchful. Like he’s curious about what’s going on around him. Sometimes I would do his voice.” She deepened her voice into her best Fen’harel impression. “Aneth era, Da’len. Why have you come to my part of the forest? And what is that fascinating glowing mark on your hand? Does it tingle? And who is your handsome friend?” She shook her head and resumed speaking in her own voice. “He sure does ask a lot of questions. Probably gathering information so he can trick us later.”

Solas smiled lightly. “These statues are all over the Emerald Graves.” He pointed to the northwest. “You can see another there in the distance.”

“Odd,” Ahrue said. “I wonder why they built so many here. Dalish clans often make our camps with the statues facing away, and we leave offerings to placate Fen’harel and ward off nightmares. But to have so many built in one place suggests…”

“That he was perhaps once revered or at least honored,” Solas finished nodding.

“Or, perhaps there was a cult devoted to him here: elves who worshipped him because he tricked the gods and shunned the People.”
“I…” he started. His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. “Yes. That is possible.”

Ahrue’s eyes fell to the bone that hung from a leather thread around Solas’ neck. “It’s a wolf’s jaw isn’t it?”

“Hmm?” he looked at her quizzically.

She pointed at the bone. “You wear a wolf’s jawbone. It is an odd choice of adornment.”

He looked down at the necklace. “Ah yes, a gift from a friend a very long time ago.”

She cocked her head. “But why a wolf bone?”

He shrugged. “I am not Dalish, so the mythos surrounding wolves did not influence my decision to wear it. If that is what you are asking.”

“I thought maybe you wore it as a charm against nightmares as you travel the fade.”

“Do you believe that would work?” he asked her with a note of teasing in his voice.

“It might. Focusing on a concrete object that holds symbolic significance or personal meaning seems like exactly the sort of thing that would be helpful while traveling a place that is shaped by the mind’s eye.”

Solas smiled at her. “That is an excellent point. But as the wolf has no symbolic value to me, it would not be effective as a totem. Besides I have not had nightmares in many years.”

“Maybe because you wear a totem against them,” Ahrue said smirking and tugging playfully at the chords of the necklace.

“Ha! Perhaps so.” He pulled her close to his side, his arm around her. She rested her head on his shoulder, and they contemplated the statue in silence. Despite his claim that the wolf had no personal significance to him, Ahrue wondered if Solas, himself a solitary wanderer of the fade,
might find Fen’harel’s story more meaningful than he let on.

After a few minutes, Ahrue heard Scout Harding’s voice coming from the camp. “Inquisitor!”

Solas kissed Ahrue’s head and stroked her closely cropped hair. “It seems your presence is required, vhenan.”

“Can’t someone else be Inquisitor today?” she grumped. After hearing the scout call again, Ahrue stepped away from Solas and reached into the pouch on her belt, fumbling through the contents for an appropriate offering. She pulled out a cloth satchel with candied nuts she used as trail rations, loosened the sting that held the satchel closed, and poured the nuts into the metal dish affixed to the base of the Dread Wolf statue. “Accept this gift Fen’harel, la en’el hamin atisha.” And grant us peaceful rest. She touched the statue’s side as she spoke, and the dream shifted around her.

Disorientation and confusion overtook Ahrue. She was standing in front of the same statue of Fen’harel, but instead of broken ruins, steps led up to a stone pavilion to her right. The sun was low in the sky and Solas was gone. In his place two young elven women knelt praying to the statue. Ahrue had never seen them, but they were familiar to her, and the sight of them brought names to mind: Elwyn and Atish’era. They seemed unaware of Ahrue’s close proximity to them.

“Fen’haril, fade walker, spin us dreams of victory and courage, so we may wake enlivened to our cause,” said Elwyn in an unfamiliar elven dialect that Ahrue never-the-less understood clearly.

“Fen’haril, rebel soul, turn our enemies’ gaze and hearts to visions of our suffering, so they may recognize our cause as just,” said Atish’era.

“Fen’haril, with watchful eyes, grant us vigilance and restraint, so we may know when to strike and when to hold, when to push onward and when to fall back.”

“Fen’haril, elvhen’s blade, sharpen our edge and our sight, so every cut may be vital and just, the blood we spill necessary, the lives we take a tribute to our ends.”

The two women turned to each other, faces ashen. Elwyn stood first and offered a hand up to Atish’era. “I still can’t imagine sleeping tonight,” Atish’era said as she got to her feet.

Elwyn tucked a stray strand of hair behind Atish’era’s ear. “Would company help?” she said
smiling wickedly.

Atish’era laughed. “Hardly! But I expect a sleepless night with you would be more fun than a sleepless night by myself.”

The women kissed. Elwyn studied the face of her beloved, lined with worry, and eyes heavy with fatigue. “You should have faith, my heart. Fen’haril would not lead us astray.”

“Fen’haril never promises anything, so I’m not sure what exactly I should have faith in. We don’t even know what his plan is!”

“Whatever he’s doing, he’ll succeed. Believe it. He stopped the War of the Sun.”

Atish’era snorted. “So some say. But that was a very long time ago.”

Elwyn took a step away from Atish’era and fixed her with an incredulous stare. “Don’t tell me you believe Elgar’nan’s lies!”

“Creators! No!” She took her lover’s hands in her own. “I believe in Fen’haril, and I believe in our cause. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t. But nothing is certain. The Wolf would be the first to admit that.”

The smell of cooking herbs and vegetables reached Ahrue’s nose. For a moment, she thought it was coming from a nearby camp, maybe the young women’s companions cooking the evening meal. But the dream faded around her and her eyes snapped open. She was in her own tent, not far from where she’d just stood in her dream. She rolled to her side to see Solas stirring a small pot suspended over the fire by supple branches bent into a simple frame. His wolf jaw necklace swung slightly with his movements.
Solas looked up at the sound of Ahrue shifting in her tent. Seeing that she was awake and sitting up, he frowned in disapproval. “Not happy to see me?” she asked as she crawled out of the tent and took a seat by the fire.

“I was hoping you would sleep for longer,” he said.

“Tired of my company already?” she said smirking.

His eyes caressed her face, surely taking in the signs of exhaustion that lingered there. His gaze then fell to her abdomen, and he sighed. She got the meaning without him having to say it: You should be taking better care of yourself, vhenan. You need sleep now more than ever. Solas returned to stirring the pot. “I simply wanted to finish preparing the meal before you woke. It will need some more time before it is ready to eat.”

Liar, she thought to herself, but this time with a degree of fondness. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her to know he cared; his eyes and anxious frown spoke volumes about how much he worried for her. His words were an attempt to respect her choices both in terms of the boundary between them and her persistent distaste for patronizing comments. He did not want to make things worse between them.

“Did I wake you?” he asked.

She waved his concern away. “Weird dream. Busy mind. And…” she thought for a beat before adding the persistent cause of her frequently disturbed sleep of late to her verbal list. She had not yet mentioned Despair’s torment of her nor how difficult it had been to get a full night’s rest when she was constantly braced for its return. “Well, my sleep has been off for a couple months. Nightmares after Corypheus.” He looked at her, brow furrowed in concern. “Nothing I can’t handle, just a restless night here and there,” she assured him.

He nodded his understanding. “What did you dream of?” He blushed immediately after asking the question and looked away. “You needn’t answer. I simply wished to make conversation, and, as you know, dreams are a favorite topic of mine.”

Perhaps he intuited his regular appearance in her dreams. Ahrue recalled her dream of the day she drank from the Vir’abelasan, waking certain that it was really him in the dream rather than just a
figment of memory. Maybe Solas had his share of dreams about her that brought that blush to his pointed ears. Her dream from the previous night had been tender, but not embarrassingly so. She didn’t mind sharing with him, skipping over the romantic parts; his own memory could fill in the gaps. “I dreamt of arriving in the Graves, when you showed me the Fen’haril statue.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’ve taken to calling him ‘Fen’haril’ now?” he asked.

She laughed. “I didn’t even notice I did it. It was strange, after I dreamed of our conversation at the statue, I had… a vision, I guess.” She told him of the conversation she’d witnessed between Elwyn and Atish’era. He listened in rapt attention. “They talked about Fen’haril ending the War of the Sun. Do you suppose that’s a reference to Elgar’nan’s feud with his father?”

“That would make sense,” he responded. The muscles in his neck were tense. Ahrue wondered if his injury was still bothering him after all, but decided not to interrupt their current conversation to ask.

“That would mean that there was a second war or some kind of battle that Fen’haril was meant to end, long enough afterward that Atish’era doubted that the War of the Sun had really taken place.”

“That is assuming that your dream was actually a memory from the Vir’abelasan rather than just a dream. You also assume that Fenaril, Fen’haril, and Fen’harel are all the same person.”

Ahrue was certain. She hadn’t even considered the possibility that the dream was of her own making or that the three names didn’t refer to the same person. Since the thought had occurred to her in Din’an Hanin, she’d been certain it was true. It was the same clarity that told her that Flemeth was Mythal. “No. I’m right about this.”

Solas looked taken aback by her surety. “How do you know?”

“The Vir’abelasan, maybe. But it makes sense. Fenaril was the name of the man leading a rebellion, Fen’haril the name of the same man when he was elevated to divine statue as the god of rebellion, and Fen’harel was the twisting of his name and reputation as part of a political maneuver.”

Solas gaped at her, saying nothing.
Ahrue blushed, thinking that he must be marveling at the ridiculousness of her silly theory. “You don’t have to look at me that way. I know how it must sound,” she said, angry at herself for still being so affected by his judgment.

Solas shook his head and a strange smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “You are extraordinary,” he said breathlessly.

Extraordinary? Not at all what she was expecting. She laughed. “Well I like that better than ‘idiotic’ or ‘out of your blighted mind.’ I have no evidence. Nothing in the ancient texts or oral history corroborates this version.”

“Ah! But you have witnesses! The memories of the Vir’abelasan stretch back millennia. In your mind, you have access to the least corrupted document of elvhen history ever discovered.” Solas reached for a tin cup and began dishing the herbageous stew. He looked at her quizically for a moment before handing her the cup and a spoon.

She took it. “Ma serannas.”

Solas served himself some stew into his own battered cup. He stared at her while she ate.

She grew gradually more uncomfortable as his gaze remained fixed on her after several bites. She laughed awkwardly. “I’m beginning to feel like a fascinating artifact. Would you stop looking at me like that? Just eat your stew.”

He shook his head as though to clear it. “My apologies. I was… lost in thought.” He took a bite of stew and stared into the cup, his eyes slowly glazing over while he chewed.

Anxiety flooded her as she tried to interpret his vacant expression. Was he thinking of how he could use her buried knowledge to his advantage? Or was he simply caught up in the implications of what she’d told him about Fen’harel? “Out with it,” she said firmly, placing her cup on the ground beside her.

He lifted his curious eyes to her face. “Tell me, lethallan, why do you supposed your thoughts are drawn to Fen’harel? Why not to the Emerald knights, or the monks of Din’an hanin? Why not to Elgar’nan or Mythal, or any other deity honored by statues in this place?”
The question was a good one and one she hadn’t considered. She’d always liked the Fen’harel statues, but Mythal was the goddess who’d occupied her attention as a child and young adult. It was Mythal’s vallaslin that marked her face, and it was Mythal’s Well and will that had drawn Ahrue here to the Graves. The voices of the Well had been pledged to Mythal. So why should Fen’harel be the one who her mind was repeatedly pulled to? “I suppose perhaps I feel a bit like a harellan myself,” she thought out loud as it occurred to her. “Rescuing Fen’harel’s reputation could be a subconscious attempt to save myself from the injustice of the label. Maybe my will is directing what memories surface in the well.”

Solas shoulders dropped and his face went a little slack. He looked disappointed.

“Sorry to let you down,” she said sharply. “Just a silly girl trying to find a reassuring story to tuck myself in with.”

He looked confused. “No, it makes sense. You worry that you have betrayed your heritage, so you understandably find comfort in a figure that has been accused of the same. It also highlights the fallibility of the people whose judgement you fear; if they were wrong about Fen’harel than they could be wrong about you. It is a logical explanation, and recognizing it demonstrates an impressive depth of self-awareness.”

“Then why did you look so disappointed when I suggested it?”

He looked down into his soup cup. “It is nothing,” he said before scooping a spoonful of stew into his mouth.

Ahrue’s temper prickled. “Right,” she said. She stood up and dumped the remaining stew in her cup back into the pot. “I’ve lost my appetite,” she said flatly in response to his confused expression.

He sighed. “I have upset you.”

She sat back down, in part because a wave of dizziness was threatening to fell her. “Why would you think that? What reason would I possibly have for getting upset when you decide to keep things from me?”

He stood up. “You are right, that was thoughtless of me.” He reached for her mug and proceeded to refill it with stew. He handed it back to her. “Eat, and I will say more.”
She looked at him icily.

“Do not punish yourself as a way to punish me.” His voice was firm and edged with irritation. “You nearly collapsed just now; you need to eat, regardless of what your appetite is telling you.”

Ahrue blushed a little. He was right, she was being passive aggressive, and it wasn’t fair to either of them. She took the cup from him, and he settled back into a seated position. “I’m sorry.” She raised her hand in a gesture of oath. “I’ll punish you more directly from this point forward.”

He laughed. “Glad to hear it!”

He watched and waited as she dramatically resumed eating her stew. She smiled as she took a large mouthful. “Mmmm.”

Solas nodded his satisfaction. “I was not disappointed in your explanation of Fen’harel’s prominence in what you’ve learned from the Vir’abelasan. I had my own theory that yours did not corroborate. That is the source of the expression to which you responded.”

Ahrue swallowed. “What was your theory?”

He sighed. “I had wondered if Fen’harel, like Mythal was perhaps still in this world in some form. If it was he who drew your thoughts to him, perhaps subconsciously.”

Ahrue thought of the wolf in her dream of the waterfall. He had seemed so real. At the time, she’d thought him a spirit, but maybe he’d been more than that. She laughed off the idea; the notion sounded completely absurd. “Why would Fen’harel take an interest in me?”

Solas smiled slightly. “Perhaps for the same reasons you thought yourself drawn to him: he may see in you a kindred spirit. Or, he may have done the same to anyone who possessed the knowledge of the Well. Those memories could be his only chance at redemption after millennia of being labeled a traitor.”

Ahrue nodded thoughtfully. Put that way, Solas’ theory actually sounded possible. Was the Fen’harel haunting her dreams and directing her thoughts really any less plausible than finding
Mythal in possession of an elderly shemlen woman? Or an ancient magister invading heaven and then coming back to do it again? “Stranger things have happened, I suppose.”

Solas smiled fondly at her. “A third possibility: you are an extraordinary woman, and try as he might, he cannot resist you.”

The mouthful of stew Ahrue had just taken was very nearly sprayed out of her nose at Solas’ bold and ridiculous flirtation! She coughed as she tried to swallow the soup down with a modicum of dignity. “Wow,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “That would be something indeed!”

“It would not be the first time one of the Elvhen pantheon pursued the affections of a mortal,” Solas said completely seriously. “Ghilan’nain was a simple shepherdess when Anduil became infatuated with her.”

Ahrue gaped at him. “Are you actually being serious? You don’t even believe in the gods.”

“Whether man, spirit, or god, I find it likely that you would draw his attention from the fade.”

Ahrue snorted. Solas had said something very similar to her before. You are unique. In all Thedas, I never expected to find someone who could draw my attention from the fade. And then he’d broken her heart. “I seem to have that effect on people,” she said wryly. Solas frowned. “But why did you say that Fen’harel may be subconsciously drawing my mind to him? Why subconsciously?”

Solas looked startled. “Did I say that?”

“Yes, you did.”

He looked flustered, and his skin reddened slightly. It reminded her of the expression her Keeper had worn when she’d come to tell an eight-year-old Ahrue that her parents had been killed by human bandits. Her panic rose instinctively and her heart started to race. “What is it, Solas? What do you know?”

“There is something I wish to tell you. But I… cannot find the words.” His voice wavered as he spoke, and for a moment Ahrue thought he might be sick.
“I can relate,” she laughed weakly, her own voice trembling slightly. “Do you suppose we can arrange to have a Venatori tell me for you? I’d prefer to skip the torture, if it’s all the same.”

He laughed through his nose. Suddenly a look of determination passed over his face. He took a deep breath and stood up.

Ahrue thought he’d lost his nerve, decided again to shut her out. “Stop!” she ordered firmly. “Solas, so help me…”

He walked to her side of the fire and knelt beside her. She pivoted to face him, and he took her hands in his. His palms were sweating and his fingers shook. She had never seen him so unnerved. He looked into her eyes. “Vhenan, I have something important to tell you. And… it will require you to suspend your disbelief.”
Solas looked into the stormy eyes of the woman he loved. They were strained with anxiety and exhaustion as she braced herself for what he was about to say. He suspected that on some level she knew—the Well hissing the truth to her somewhere in the cacophony of voices and memories—and had been pushing aside the truth because it was simply too much. I shouldn’t do this, he thought to himself. *It is selfish of me to tell her. She would be happier not knowing.* But he had passed the point of no return. He tried to search for something else he could say that could take the place of his confession. He could tell her that he’d met Fenaril in the fade, that he was a somniari like Solas himself, and thus he’d come to his suspicion that Fenaril may be unconsciously drawing Ahrue’s mind to him.

“The Truth

“The Truth

Solas,” she said, her voice edged with both worry and anger. “Do not back away from this. Tell me what you know.”

He almost laughed. She’d recognized his flagging resolve. Intuition and brilliance now paired with a healthy distrust of him made her penetrating comprehension difficult to evade. Looking into the fervent eyes of his beloved, Solas found himself incapable of lying to her. He needed her to love or hate him for what he really was, as much as it may hurt them both. “I… am far older than I have previously suggested,” he said, easing in. He’d told her once that he was in the midst of his fourth decade. A far cry from the truth.

Ahrue narrowed her eyes. “Tell me that’s not it.”

“It isn’t. I… have witnessed the fall of the Dales.” He took a deep breath and watched her eyes widen. “I have witnessed the fall of Arlathan, not from dreams in the fade, but from the edges of the great city itself.” He paused, waiting for his words to sink in.

Ahrue opened her mouth as though to speak, took a gasping breath, pinched her lips together tightly as she held that breath, and then released it in a plosive puff. She swallowed hard before speaking. “Like… like Abelas and the sentinels.”

“Older than them, but yes, I am one of the few ancient Elvhen who yet lives in this world.”

She pressed a palm to her head as though trying to still her racing thoughts. “Right… Right… There’s more, isn’t there?” she said with a buzz of anxiety in her tone.
“Yes. Your memories of Fenaril… everything you have gleaned of him is true.”

She shook her head, laughing manically, and then clasped a palm to her mouth, silencing her laugh abruptly. She froze staring at him and took a few deep breaths through her fingers before removing her hand and saying in a shaking voice, on the brink of laughter and tears, “You know because you were there.”

Solas took another deep breath, trying to find strength in the air. He fixed her with eyes of steel. “I know, because—“

“No, no, stop,” she said in a hurried panic, pressing a trembling hand firmly to his lips. “Creators, oh creators.” He could see it in her clever tear-filled eyes while she stared at him as though he was transforming into a stranger before her: the pieces coming together. She shook her head rapidly and through tightly closed lips made little muffled sounds in a futile attempt to keep the encroaching understanding at bay. Ahrue suddenly backed away from him until her back was pressed against the pole of her tent. She drew her knees to her chest and hugged them to her body. Tears streamed from her eyes. “Solas,” she sobbed.

“I’m here, vhenan,” he said in a choked voice. He moved toward her, intending to embrace her, to hold her until she’d regained herself. But she put up both hands in a frantic halting gesture that made him freeze in his tracks, his heart aching for her.

She put both her hands to her mouth and nose. The sound of her panicked breathing magnified against her palms. For several minutes, she sat there without a word, wide unblinking eyes fixed on his face. “Say it,” she said at last between shallow terrified breaths. “I need you to say it.”

He wanted to take it back, to say that she’d misunderstood. But he could tell that the Well had already confirmed her belief, as it had when she’d met Flemeth and tried to resist the realization that she was Mythal. But she wanted to hear it from him, or wanted him to deny it, have his words banish the Vir’abelasan, wishing she could let the knowledge of the Well slip from her so she might keep her fiction intact. But that fiction was already shattered, had been shattered since he’d left her without explanation months ago.

Solas’ heart raced as the words he hadn’t said in centuries found their way to his lips. “I am Fen’harel.”
Ahrue laughed. It started as a snort, and worked its way to part her lips in a few breathy chuckles. Then her chest got behind it, and soon her whole body was shaking with practically noiseless laughter. Tears poured from her eyes, she could barely breathe, but still she laughed.

Solas grabbed her upper arms and shook her. “Vhenan!” His voice was so far away, and his face was blurred through tears.

No, she corrected herself. It wasn’t Solas. That was Fen’harel shaking her and calling her “vhenan.” She continued to laugh. What a fine Dalish she was. A year on her own, and she had not only been completely taken in by the Dread Wolf—allowed herself to trust him and be used by him—she had fallen in love with him, and now she carried his bastard child. It had to be a cosmic joke.

“Ahrue!” His voice called across a chasm to his chosen one. Of all the people in Thedas, only she could draw his attention from the fade. She who had studied all her life to assume the position of Keeper, a role charged with the responsibility to protect her clan from the Dread Wolf. Harellan was not a sufficient word to describe what she was.

She was laughing so hard that she couldn’t breathe, and her head swam with the lack of air. She gasped involuntarily, her lungs desperate for breath. She coughed on the choking inhale. The pause it forced in her laughter allowed her to regain herself some. She whipped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. She was on her back. No, she was in Solas arms—Fen’harel’s arms—being gently laid on her bedroll. She coughed again, a deep barking cough that pulled wheezing and painful from her lungs.

He pressed a water skin to her mouth. “Drink,” he said tipping the liquid to her lips. She obeyed, and the water, cool and soothing, lifted some of the fog that had settled on her senses. Solas looked at her, his eyes glassy, brow knit, and skin sweaty. “Are you alright?” He still sounded far away. Fen’harel sounded far away.

She took the canteen from him and had another drink of water, wishing it was something stronger. She wasn’t sure that the lifting fog was a mercy. Being numb would be a pleasanter state than the gradual clarity that was building with every sip and every breath. Solas was Fen’harel.

“Ahrue, please!” he said in a voice on the edge of panic. “Speak to me! Tell me you are alright!”

She slowly sat up, coughing some more. She winced against the pain of it and pressed a hand to her chest. “Alright?” she wheezed. “I can’t...” she was about to say that she couldn’t remember the last time she’d been ‘alright,’ but another painful cough interrupted her snark.
“What can I do?” he asked helplessly.

“A cup of tea, please… I have the leaves for it in my pack.” The words came out thin and strained.

“Of course,” he said and set about the task she gave him while she used his absence to try to put her frantic thoughts in order.

Solas was Fen’harel. Solas was Fen’harel. It was impossible, but she’d known it to be true before he’d even said the words. Solas was Fen’harel. She had an odd feeling of relief, like having a word or a name on the tip of her tongue for days and then finally pulling it out of the dredges of her mind to say it. Solas was Fen’harel. She’d had the pieces, those strange bits of connection points that she’d noticed and never followed to their conclusion, because the conclusion was unthinkable. Solas was Fen’harel. How long had part of her known, how long had she been pushing aside the details to keep the realization at bay? Solas was Fen’harel.

She took another painful wheezing breath and tried to calm herself with a kinder turn in her thoughts. If Solas was Fen’harel, he was also, Fen’haril, and Fenaril. He had rebelled against Elgar’nan to end a civil war that was hurting the people. He was not the mythic Dread Wolf, she told herself firmly. He did not feed on sleepers or give nightmares to children. He was not a kin traitor who’d trapped the ancient gods and caused the downfall of Elvhenan. He would have an explanation. He had to have an explanation.

And there was a lot to explain. How much had he really known about the orb and Corypheus? The Vir’abelasan? She’d wondered at this before, but now her questions had fire. He’d claimed that the orb was an ancient Elvhen artifact. He’d said it was a key belonging to one of the Elvhen pantheon. Had it belonged to him or one of the others? What power had he hoped to gain through its acquisition?

A thought gripped her. It was a key. Myth had it that Fen’harel had locked away the Elvhen gods and the Forgotten Ones. And now the key was destroyed, and they were on a quest that he’d claimed would end in them sealing the Golden City, so no one could ever corrupt it again. Perhaps it was not the seat of the Maker that they were bound for. Perhaps it was not corruption Solas feared, but escape. Had the shattered orb set the door to heaven ajar?

Solas returning with a steaming cup of tea in hand interrupted her thoughts. Solas who was really Fen’harel was handing her a cup of tea. His nose wrinkled a little at the smell. Solas hated tea, she recalled. Fen’harel hated tea. She almost laughed out loud at the thought. Ahrue took the tea and brought the cup to her mouth. She breathed in the steam and let the heat ease some of the pain in her chest before taking a sip of the hot bitter liquid.
Solas sat on the ground in front of her, close enough that their knees were touching. He watched her as she drank. She watched him watching her. *Fen’harel* was watching her with concern. His face—*Fen’harel’s* face—was the same intelligent, sad, compassionate face she had come to love above all others, the same face she had watched sleeping in the early morning so many times, delighting in the way his eyes twitched with the intrigue of the fade. Now that face was looking at her with the same worry that she had seen there every time she took a hit in battle, the same fear it had worn when she’d decided to drink from the Vir’abelasan, the same guilt she had witnessed when she’d confirmed that she was with child. Now, every time she took a wheezing breath, the muscles in his neck and jaw visibly tensed. “Is the tea helping at all,” he asked softly.

Ahrue nodded and took another breath of steam and a sip of tea.

“Did I make the wrong choice?” he asked, diverting his gaze to his hands resting limply on his thighs. He looked tired. Broken. *Fen’harel* looked broken.

She took another sip of tea. Which choice? Brewing her black tea instead of mint? Or locking up the Elvhen gods for a thousand years? “Which choice specifically are you referring to? You’ve made some rather infamous ones.”

He chuckled through his nose in spite of himself. It helped to hear him laugh, to see him look so defeated. It made him feel more real. “Telling you who I am… Should I not have?”

In that moment, she wished he hadn’t, longed to return to blissful ignorance, to believe that he was just a strange dreamer who maybe loved her, maybe used her, and was too flighty to be a real father to their child. But a deeper part of herself believed that knowing was better than ignorance, no matter how blissful that ignorance was. “I think…” she started tentatively, “that after the dust settles, it will ultimately be better that I know.”

“And before the dust settles?” he asked looking into her eyes.

“It hurts.” She took another sip of tea to continue to ease the tightness in her lungs.

He nodded sadly. “You must have questions.”

To put it mildly. Where to begin? Are you a kin traitor? Did you lock away the gods? Did you know what the orb was from the beginning? Did you know what the Well would do to me? “What
should I call you?"

“‘Solas’ will do fine.”

“But it’s not who you really are.”

He looked hurt by that. “I am Solas. I was born ‘Fenaril,’ but have not used that name in over a millennium.”

“Too bad. It’s a nice name.” She liked the way it felt on her tongue, and enjoyed the sound of the flipped “r” sandwiched between the light vowels. “Fenaril.” She said it several times out loud, appreciating the distraction of focusing on something so mundane as a name. It made him ordinary. Just a man with a nice name.

He smiled weakly. “I have used many names since then, and have gone by ‘Solas’ for nearly a century. But if ‘Fenaril’ feels more genuine to you, I will answer to it.”

Many names. Some more ordinary than others. He was Fen’harel. She searched her mind for what to ask him next. No question felt safe. She thought back to how this conversation had started: simply telling him about a dream as she had done dozens of times before. But this dream had pushed her in dangerous directions, tempting her curiously, and ended with her hearing Solas tell her that he was Fen’harel. Ahrue’s heart was racing, as she found that fork in her memory, the place where she could have gone left instead of right, the place where she asked a question that ended in Solas being Fen’harel. “This all started because I asked you why you thought that Fen’harel was subconsciously influencing my thoughts.”

He nodded. “Would you like me to elaborate?” he asked cautiously, looking at her as though he feared she might crumble into dust at any moment. “You could rest, and we can resume this conversation once you have had time to… process.”

Ahrue laughed, eyes welling up with the completely overwhelming rush of feelings, questions, and worries that whirled like a storm inside her. “How does someone even start to process this?”

“I can’t imagine,” he said with sincerity and compassion in his voice. She sunk into that voice, felt momentarily steady in the familiar brogue and caressing vowels.
“Keep talking,” she said abruptly.

“Very well,” he agreed. He took a deep breath before beginning. “Ordinarily, my dreams are entirely under my command, the fade is mine to shape according to my will. But since leaving your side, I have been drawn to you involuntarily, over and over again, dream of little besides you. On multiple occasions, I have found that it was not only figments of you that I had obsessively conjured, but your very spirit.”

“The dream of the Vir’abelasan.” She’d seen him there and had been filled with a vague but powerful sense of betrayal.

“And the waterfall.”

She took a deep rattling breath, recalling the wolf who’d comforted her in her dream her first night after her return to Skyhold. “The wolf, it was you.”

“Yes. And there were other occasions when I watched from the shadows as you dreamed. Sometimes you would look at me directly and I would think that you knew.”

She winced. “I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“As I said, it was not an intentional invasion. I had lost focus, and my need for you was like a tide pulling me out to sea again and again. Until we met at the Vir’abelasan.”

That was the last dream she’d had before Despair had tormented her. “What changed?” Ahrue asked.

“You. Whether you intended it or not, I began to feel you actively repel me. Whenever I drew close, I would be pushed away.”

She believed it. Her final thoughts every night before sleeping since their shared dream of the Well had been a fervent wish that she not encounter Solas. “I didn’t want to see you,” she admitted. “I had begun to realize that you weren’t who I thought you were, began to sense that you’d known more about… everything than you’d let on. I was terrified that I would meet you again.” She didn’t add that Despair had tormented her through her memories of Solas, that she’d felt his hands strike her, heard his voice mock and shame her.
“Understandable.” His voice cracked with emotion. “It stopped our paths from crossing in the fade, but still I conjured memories of you every time I slept, could not shake you from my thoughts, and I did not wish to.” He laughed weakly through his nose. “And then you were here, appeared as though summoned from the fade itself. I thought, perhaps, failing to find you in the fade, I had somehow touched your mind and directed you here.”

“Through the Vir’abelasan.”

“Yes. Earlier, when you spoke to me again of Fenaril, I thought perhaps I had subconsciously drawn you to me and was using the Well to reveal the truth of my past.”

Ahrue rebelled against the thought, tensing her jaw and shaking her head. He had thought she was under his control? “But you were disappointed when I told you why I thought I was dreaming of Fen’harel. You wanted it to be you who drew me here?”

“Yes. But not for the reason you fear. I have no desire to control you. I had hoped that if it was I who was directing you through fade, pulling at the memories of the Well, then Mythal was not abusing her power over you after all. It was my hope that had it been my will that directed you, perhaps realizing it, I could release my hold on you so you could stay or go as you chose. I would not have you shackled to my cause, no matter how useful you are or… how much I long to remain with you.”

“No,” she said firmly. “It’s bad enough knowing that Mythal can pull my strings whenever she pleases. If you could do that…” she didn’t say what came unbidden to her thoughts: *If you could do that, I couldn’t love you.* “If you could do that it would mean I was caught in some tug-of-war between ancient gods, pulling me according to their whims. It’s too much.”

“It is irrelevant. Even as the thought occurred to me, it felt untrue. And your intuition in this matter is undoubtedly correct. It is your own will that brought the truth of Fenaril, of me, to the surface of the Vir’abelasan. And it was Mythal who directed you to my side and holds you here against your will.” His eyes flashed momentarily and his jaw clenched.

It bothered him that she was not with him of her own volition. Or did it just trouble him that it was Mythal who held her chains? Perhaps he did not trust Mythal to allow him to carry out his plan. Would he try to kill Ahrue if Mythal used her to try to stop him? Her stomach clenched. Would Mythal use her to kill Solas?
He studied her face, likely seeing the blood drain from her skin at the thought of fighting him, killing him or being killed by him. “What is it?” he asked.

Ahrue looked down at her fidgeting hands. “What happens if Mythal uses me against you?”

“She already has. She uses you to drive me onward to the Eluvian. She is over-eager to see me use it. As far as her using you physically against me, it would not happen. I am of no use to Mythal if I die before reaching my destination.”

Ahrue felt somewhat relieved and significantly more confused by his assurance. “Wait. Are you being controlled by Mythal as well?”

He scoffed. “She may like to think so. But no, not in any direct sense. We are united in cause, even if I don’t care for her methods.”

Ahrue’s eyes narrowed trying to glean some new meaning from his words. “And that cause, it is as you told me before? You wish to seal the Golden City?”

He was quiet for a beat too long and she sensed a lie building behind his steely eyes. “Yes,” he said flatly.

Her nostrils flared. “And this has nothing to do with the ancient Elvhen gods you allegedly locked away in the fade? Because that is just a myth, right?”

He laughed, studying her face. Perhaps searching for clues as to what might satisfy her questions. “What does the Well tell you?”

The Well was silent. “I’m asking you.”

His expression softened. “Are you sure you want to know?”

Ahrue snorted. “You opened the floodgates. You can’t tell me you’re Fen’harel and then refuse to tell me whether or not you have the gods locked up in a fade cupboard.”
“It’s a bit more opulent than a cupboard,” he said grinning.

She gaped at him. The pride in that smile was unsettling, alarming even. Ahrue’s heart raced, and she focused on keeping her breath as steady and calm as possible. He really was Fen’harel, he really did lock away the Elvhen gods. “Creators,” she mumbled and pressed her palm to the side of her forehead. “I really am the worst Dalish ever,” she said breathily. Ahrue fixed Solas with her stormy eyes. “Did you get a good laugh out of it? Your paramour, the mother of your child, a First to a Dalish Keeper? Was it a joke to you?”

He took her right hand which was tensed claw-like atop her thigh, leaned forward, and pressed it to his heart. “Never, vhenan,” he said in a soft steady voice. “Doubt everything about me except that. My feelings for you are real. Envisioning the pain this would cause you, made me end things between us rather than tell you the truth. I could never derive pleasure from inflicting this on you.”

The feel of his heart pulsing beneath her fingers made Ahrue’s breath catch. Fen’harel had a heart. Fen’harel was a person. She had seen him bleed, had seen him on the cusp of death. Fen’harel could die. Ahrue pulled her hand away. “What are you, exactly?”

“You want to know if I’m a god? A spirit? An abomination?” he shook his head. “I’m none of that. I possess the long life of the Elvhen; an understanding of magic that has been lost to time; and I am a somniari, a gift that was unique even in my time. That aside, I am like any other mortal elf. Outside of the fade, there are many mages who could best me, yourself included. But within the fade, I am without equal.”

He said it all so matter-of-factly that Ahrue had to laugh. “Practically the boy next door!”

He smiled his usual impish grin. “And how would you describe yourself, Inquisitor?”

“Ex-Inquisitor,” she corrected. “I’m just your run-of-the-mill Dalish mage.”

He laughed. “Indeed! We are not so different. As you may recall, some call you the Herald of Andraste. In another thousand years, perhaps the stories will elevate you to divinity as well.”

An unnerving thought. “How did it happen to you? How did you go from being Fenaril to Fen’haril to…” her breath caught on the name, “Fen’harel?”
“Like you. Someone called for help, and I acted.”

Ahrue nodded remembering what she had learned in Din’an Hanin. “The War of the Sun. The people were suffering, so you organized the rebellion.”

A sad smile ghosted across his face. “Yes. But not alone. I started as one of many leaders in the rebellion. And after I arranged the treaty between Elgar’nan and Elgara, thanks in no small part to Mythal, I was elevated as something of a symbol to the people.”

It was a familiar story. She too had initially seen herself as little more than a field agent of the Inquisition, one of many players united in the cause, who just happened to specialize at sealing rifts. She’d quickly become much more than that to the people of Thedas.

“‘Fen’haril’ was a teasing pun on my name thought up by one of the other leaders of the rebellion. It caught on with the people and eventually stuck. And ‘Fen’harel,’ as you surmised, was an invention of those who opposed the growing influence of the rebel movement. A convenient play on words that highlights how civil disobedience is differently perceived by the oppressed and the oppressors. The thin line between hero and traitor.” Solas’ face darkened. His eyes were distant, perhaps seeing the past play out again, reliving the pain and anger of having his character and motives disparaged by Elgar’nan’s followers.

On an impulse, Ahrue reached out and squeezed his hand, bringing a light to his eyes and a softness to his mouth. She felt compassion for him and the memories she was asking him to relive. But he’d owed her an explanation for far too long for her to allow him to stop now. “What happened next?”
Solas strapped his pack to Dirtharavas’ back. Ahrue was opting to walk over ride, so the halla could easily manage the extra weight of Solas’ bag. He turned to watch Ahrue as she fastened her breastplate and adjusted her belt around her slightly distended middle. Soon she would be at his side, asking more questions. Her initial response to his identity had left him shaken, both in the highs and the lows of it. It… had not been ideal. He had anticipated anger, disbelief, and hatred, but the ebbing and flowing panic that she was caught in was not something he’d predicted. One moment she would look at him with warmth or mirth, speak easily as a familiar if not affectionate companion. She’d appear tired but relaxed in his company. Then the muscles of her neck and jaw would tighten and her eyes would either dart or fix him with unblinking anxiety. Her language would become halted, and her breath would become shallow and strained. He imagined himself wavering in her sight, appearing one moment as Solas, the next as the slavering Dread Wolf.

But what impressed him, what touched him was that, through it all, no matter how much she wanted to shy away from him and shut out the truth, she tried consistently to understand. Sometimes her questions were cutting and uncharitable, at other times, lovingly and compassionately posed. But whether kind or cruel, each question was asked with the aim of bringing the confused and hazy image of him into sharper focus. She wanted to understand him.

She stood up and affixed her staff to the strap at her back. “Ready?” she asked evenly.

He nodded, and they started walking northward, side by side. They were close enough that if he bent his hand slightly outward, his fingertips would graze hers. It had been his favorite way of flirting with her inconspicuously when they had traveled together with their Inquisition companions. He resisted the urge, knowing that if she felt his fingertips against hers, Ahrue would step further from him to wordlessly reify the distance between them. She had not been entirely cold to him—she’d held his hand when he’d begun to brood about the past, a tender moment of connection that had meant more to him than he would have anticipated—but she still took the occasional opportunity to remind him that things were not the same between them, that he had lost her, and that it was entirely his fault.

He felt Ahrue’s eyes on him, and turned to see her looking curiously at him, a slight grin pulling at one corner of her mouth. “What is it?” he asked cautiously.

“I was just wondering what you looked like back when you were Fenaril.”

He noticed her eyes linger on the top of his head. “You are wondering if I had hair?” he laughed.
She smiled broadly, the brightest he’d seen her smile in a long time.

“I did. And it was very nice hair, if I say so myself.” He smirked, delighted to engage in a moment of frivolous conversation before her questions would inevitably return to the political machinations of ancient Arlathan. “It was a lustrous copper, and I wore it plaited down my back.” He shook his head and tried to frown, his mouth twitching in rebellion. “Alas, it was lost to me long ago, one more priceless relic of Elvhenan forgotten in the passage of time.”

Ahrue laughed and kicked at a small stone, sending it skittering ahead. “How could the Dalish have forgotten Fen’harel’s flaming red hair?”

“Clearly a dire oversight.”

“But then we also forgot that half our Gods were brutal tyrants who cared more about engaging in divine pissing contests than about the people they were supposed to lead.”

Solas recognized her tug back to the more serious questions she had left off with at camp. It was good to see her happy, however brief, but she was never a person to remain mirthful for overlong. For her, humor was a resting place, a brief withdrawal from the usual intensity of her thought. Her laughter and smiles were always fleeting, especially of late.

“So how did you go from being the rebel leader to being one of their lot?” she asked frankly.

“Honestly? I never really was one of ‘their lot.’ You see, while I was simply an Elvhen mage, Elgar’nan and his inner circle, the Uth’elgar’vhen, as they were called, were something else quite different.”

Ahrue raised her eyebrows. “Elgar’vhen? Spirit elves? Is it how it sounds?”

His jaw tightened and fists clenched with the memory. “Yes. So began the ancient origins of the practice of binding spirits to mortal bodies. Elgar’nan was the first, binding himself to a spirit of vengeance in order to gain an upper hand against his father. When he recognized the power it gave him, he shared the ritual with his trusted few: Mythal bound herself to Justice, Dirthamen to Wisdom, Falon’din to Pride, Andruil to Valor, June to Faith, and Sylaise to Compassion.”

“Why did Falon’din and Elgar’nan bind themselves to demons while the others chose spirits?” she
asked, her brow and nose wrinkled in confusion.

“They may not have understood their nature. But it made little difference. Over time even the nobler spirits were corrupted by the darker natures of the mortals to whom they were bound.”

Her eyes widened. “They all became abominations?”

Solas shook his head. “No. Not exactly. The spirits or demons did not overcome them. The relationship was… symbiotic. In time, the spirits and the people they were bound to were so deeply intertwined that they bore little resemblance to either part’s origination. They were Elgar’vhen.”

“You didn’t mention Ghilan’nain. Was she not bound to a spirit?”

Solas smiled warmly, remembering the beautiful and gentle woman with a rare temper that even Elgar’nain would bend under at times. “Ghilan’nain did not come by her nature as the others did. Her story is not unlike Cole’s. Once a shepherdess, Ghilan’nain retaliated when a hunter slaughtered her flock. She approached the Uth’elgar’vhen seeking… no, that is too mild a word… demanding justice.” He recalled her bursting through the council chamber door, guards shouting after her, fire in her eyes as she slammed her hands on the council table, ordering the Uth’elgar’vhen to intercede. “Andruil was completely taken with her and personally attended to the matter. She cast the hunter out of his home and set it on fire. All his worldly possessions burned to the ground. When the man discovered it was Ghilan’nain who had reported his misdeeds, he abducted her, tied her to a tree, and tortured her to the brink of death. When the hunter abandoned her to the elements, Ghilan’nain wept, longing for a merciful end to her pain, and a spirit of compassion came to her. With the power of the spirit, she was able to escape.”

“Do spirits of compassion do that often?”

“No, I know of only the two occurrences: Ghilan’nain and Cole. A desperate mage may call a demon to them in order to save their own life or the life of someone they care for. But it takes a rare person to summon Compassion rather than Vengeance, Rage, or Pride to help them in their moment of need. Also, in both Ghilan’nain’s and Cole’s circumstances, they had been abandoned by their captor when the spirit came to them. Their immediate need was to be free of pain and suffering. Compassion is drawn to such needs.”

Ahrue nodded and reached out to flick a beetle from Solas’ shoulder. His skin warmed at the brief tenderness of the gesture. “What happened to the hunter?” she asked.
Solas eyes darkened. “Andruil was not so kind on her second visit to the man. She hunted him, toyed with him for days as he desperately tried to escape her.” Solas cringed recalling Andruil tell the story while drunk and laughing at the suffering she’d brought the man who’d victimized her beloved. “I… will not recount the details. He died.”

“And Ghilan’nain?”

“At Andruil’s insistence, she was accepted as the last member of the Uth’elgar’vhen.” He smiled softly at Ahrue, “I never knew Ghilan’nain to be cruel or tyrannical. She was the best of them. She stood with me many times in opposition to Elgar’nan, Falon’din, and even Andruil.”

They walked in silence for a while. Ahrue stroked Dirtharavas’ neck, likely thinking of the Mother of the Halla, grateful to learn that at least one member of the Elven Pantheon was not a monstrous tyrant. Solas was glad that he could keep the reputation of Ghilan’nain somewhat intact for her. He thought again of the halla carving in his pack. It was not an opportune moment to stop and rifle through his bag to find the figurine, but Solas suspected that Ahrue would welcome the gift now. Perhaps when they camped for the night he could give it to her, see her smile as her fingers lovingly traced the etchings.

“I’m unclear on exactly what your relationship to the Uth’elgar’vhen was. You say you had many dealings with them, but that you were never really one of them.”

“After Elgar’nan succeeded his father, he was determined to crush the rebel movement that had been growing in the shadows of Elvhenan for over one-hundred years. We had a tendency to… interfere with his efforts to increase his power and would often make the new king look foolish and inept.” Solas smirked. “But our cause was more deeply rooted in the hearts of the people than he had guessed, and no acts of violence or propaganda diminished our passion or efficacy. Every strike against us brought more people to our cause.”

“Were you anarchists?” Ahrue asked looking both surprised and impressed.

“Some were, but most simply wanted a government that did not harm them, new leadership, a voice.”

A teasing smile settled on Ahrue’s lips at his evasive answer. “And where did you fall in that spectrum?”
“I… was young.”

She snorted. “You were over a hundred years old!”

He smiled. “As I said, very young. Mostly my interest was in humiliating Elgar’nan and forcing him to see his people.”

Ahrue’s eyes widened and a broad grin gradual spread across her face. “You know who you sound like!”

He sighed heavily and fixed Ahrue with a glower. He knew. “Do not say it.”

“Sera! You were the original Red Jenny!” Her tone was ecstatic.

“So glad that my youthful priorities can serve to amuse you.” His voice was dour, but he was in fact glad that she was deriving more than just pain and confusion from his confession of his past.

“You think you’re bothered by the resemblance? Sera would be horrified!”

No doubt. Solas cleared his throat loudly. “If you’re quite finished?”

She pinched her lips shut, but still her eyes danced with mischievous.

“As I was saying, I wanted Elgar’nan to see his people, the harm he caused them, to recognize the justice behind our actions, and thus the injustice of his own.”

Ahrue’s expression shifted suddenly. “Fen’haril, rebel soul, turn our enemies’ gaze and hearts to visions of our suffering, so they may recognize our cause as just.”

Solas felt the blood drain from him as Ahrue spoke the words of the old prayer. He looked straight ahead. “Did you learn those words from your vision?”
“Yes it was part of the prayer the young women said. A prayer to you.”

His skin prickled and his voice fell. “That came much later.”

Perhaps unconsciously, Ahrue’s steps drifted a little further from him. In another minute, she was out of arms reach. His gaze fell to the ground. She could cope with the thought of him being the rebel leader, was put at ease seeing that his actions as a youth were not entirely unlike Sera’s mischievous pranks, but remembering that he was once worshipped clearly unsettled her. It unsettled him. Had always unsettled him. “I never asked for it,” he said softly.

“Never asked for what?” she asked.

He lifted his eyes and looked at her tense face. “Being worshipped. I asked the people not to. I burnt any temple they erected in my honor to the ground. But still they built the statues, altars, mosaics, still they prayed to me. Mythal encouraged it. She said the people needed me to be the symbol of their power.” He shrugged. “So I accepted their deification of me as an act of resistance against Elgar’nan, their prayers as prayers to themselves to strengthen their resolve as they faced the cruelty of their oppressors. Even so, I was never widely worshiped. The only reason there are so many statues here--”

“Is because of Elgar’nan’s temple,” she finished. “They did it to show that they still resisted him.”

Gratitude warmed Solas. She understood. “Did the Vir’abelasan show you that?”

“It showed me that Din’an Hanin was once a temple to Elgar’nan, and it showed me what Fen’haril was to the people. The rest I guessed. But it felt true as I said it.”

He smiled slightly. “It is. It was not uncommon for a statue of the Wolf to appear outside a temple to Elgar’nan, Falon’din, or Andruil after the Elgar’vhen committed an act of senseless cruelty. It became a form of protest.”

Ahrue looked away. “You meant so much to them,” she said quietly.

“That bothers you,” he said, seeing that her body was still tensed against him.
She nodded stiffly. “It’s easier for me to think of you as a man. Fenaril with the red hair who liked to irritate nobles. It’s all less overwhelming if you’re just that, if the story stops there.” She pressed a hand to her head, wincing. “But it didn’t.”

He frowned, wishing it did. “No. It didn’t. When it became clear to the Uth’elgar’vhen that the rebel movement had spread throughout Elvhenan, Mythal approached Elgar’nan and the others with a proposition: permit the people a representative, one of their own who could act as their voice. Elgar’nan hated the idea. He knew exactly who the people would want as their representative: The Wolf. But Mythal and the others convinced him that elevating me was the only way of calming the passion of the masses, and it was a gesture that would gain them all much favor with the people.”

Ahrue looked at him with narrowed eyes and furrowed brow. “I’m surprised you agreed to take the position.”

He sighed and shook his head ruefully. “I was firmly against it, but it was what the people wanted. When the offer was made, many took it as the ultimate victory we had all worked and bled for. Most of the rebels were simply desperate moderates, and representation in their government was their highest ambition. The anarchists and abolitionists were few. It became quickly clear that if I refused the position, our cause would lose more supporters than we could afford.”

“So you became one of the Uth’elgar’vhen, one of the pantheon,” she said darkly.

“One of their council. But I never became an Elgar’vhen,” he said firmly. “When the people insisted that my image be included in depictions of the Uth’elgar’vhen, Elgar’nan made sure that my likeness would appear only as a wolf to show that I was a simple beast in comparison to the true Elgar’vhen. The pet of the true gods,” he spat.

Ahrue nodded. The tension in her neck and face had relaxed some. The pair passed several hours in thoughtful silence, Solas constantly braced for the barrage of questions that he knew would come next.
Ahrue and Solas arrived at the small town of Chalumeau just after sunset. They’d passed the day’s walk largely in silence. Ahrue had many more questions, but silence was a nice reprieve. She had so far avoided the more difficult questions, the one’s that weighed heaviest on her mind, the ones that could make her hate him. Not that it was easy to hear him talk about his demi-god origins. The lies he had told her in the past were like a blade in her chest, and every small truth he told now twisted that blade, reminded her that she had been utterly deceived by the person she loved above all others. But when the twisting paused, she would step away, process his words, and the pain would ease some, the wound would begin to heal. She imagined the blade of his deception twisting outward instead of inward, corkscrewing as he gradually removed it, turn by turn. She reminded herself that the damage the truths caused was purposeful, painful in the moment, yet ultimately the only way she could heal was if that blade came out. But her mind would darken as she envisioned what was to come. When she would finally ask him about more current events—the orb, the anchor, the Vir’abelasan, the Eluvian—she wasn’t sure that the damage his answers would cause her could be healed.

“Are we stopping here for the night?” Solas asked.

She nodded. “I need to let Leliana know about the Venatori’s spy in Skyhold who leaked my whereabouts. I’m going to check at the tavern for Inquisition agents to see if I can send a message. While we’re here, we might as well get a good night’s sleep in the inn.” She smiled imagining a firm mattress and down blankets. “I could do with a night on a real bed.”

Solas chuckled. “I seem to remember a young Dalish mage saying that she would never grow accustomed to sleeping on a soft Shemlen bed.”

“Yes, well, that Dalish mage wasn’t four months pregnant and exhausted from fighting Templars and Venatori, standing guard all night, and finding out that the father of her child is an evil demi-god.” She regretted her bluntness as soon as the words had left her lips. She blushed.

“Then it is good that real beds are available to us tonight,” he said brightly, but his face had fallen slightly at her words, upset by her calling him an “evil demi-god” or by the unwelcome reminder that she was with child. Or maybe he just regretted her exhaustion and discomfort. “A meal would also be most welcome,” he added.

As they approached the gates Ahrue halted Dirtharavas and began removing their equipment from the halla’s back. “I won’t make you stay in the stables, Dirth.” She stroked her neck, loving the feel of the downy moon-colored hair against her callused fingers. “Find a cool green patch to pass the night, and we’ll see you just after sunrise.” Dirtharavas nuzzled under Ahrue’s chin and then trotted off into the trees.
Ahrue and Solas shouldered their equipment and walked up the cobbled pathway and through the city gates. The guard on watch recognized Ahrue and bowed as she passed by. She’d been through this town with the Inquisition forces once before, and the visit had left an impression on the villagers, closing a rift that had opened in the cellar of the local chantry.

“Our visit may be more conspicuous than I’d hoped,” she said, noticing two people whispering and pointing in their direction from the shadows of the nearby market.

Solas frowned and lowered his voice. “We should be on our guard. If the Venatori have agents here…”

Ahrue nodded and pulled her cowl over her head. While Solas was far from useless in a fight, he would not have been her first choice to provide backup if the Venatori attacked. She hoped that Leliana still had agents stationed here; they might need them for more than letter delivery.

They approached the battered red door of La Bouilloire Rouillée, the local tavern inn. The door squeaked loudly as Ahrue swung it open. As they stepped into the warmly lit room, several heads turned, and whispers hissed under the din of drunken revelry. Near the bar, a table of two humans and a dwarf dressed in light Inquisition-issue armor stood up abruptly at the sight of her. All three looked familiar, but Ahrue blanked on their names. Leliana’s people. One of the humans signaled for her companions to sit, while she approached Ahrue and Solas alone.

“Lady Lavellan,” she said in a Free Marches accent and bowed slightly. “Nightingale sent word that you might be in the area, but she didn’t expect that you would actually come through Chalumeau. I’m Agent Henley. That’s Mallow and Renden at the table,” she said pointing a thumb over her shoulder at the dwarf and the other human. “Can we be of service?”

“Yes.” Ahrue waved for Henley to follow her into the shadows of a darkened stairwell.

“I will arrange lodging,” Solas whispered before stepping away.

In the relative quiet of the dimly lit stairwell, the two were out of direct eyeshot of the tavern’s patrons. She kept her voice low. “Henley, have you heard any word of Red Templars or Venatori in the area?”

Henley’s eyes widened. “No, my lady. All had been quiet.”
“No suspicious activity of any kind? Nothing out of the ordinary?”

“An occasional traveler, but otherwise no. You and Serah Solas are the only people of note to arrive here in months. Chalumeau is far from being an exciting post.” Henley grimaced. “Um, not that I’m… complaining, mind you. Better a dull post than…”

Ahrue held up her hand and smiled. “It’s fine, Henley. I’d be bored here too.”

Henley grinned gratefully. “Thank you, my lady.”

“I need to get a message to Leliana.”

“Course, Messere. She’ll be glad to know you’re alright. But… uh…” Henley’s eyes darted in the direction of the bar and she lowered her voice to a strained whisper. “What should I say to her about Serah Solas?”

Ahrue rubbed the back of her neck, uncertain of what to say to Henley. She had not considered the problems that being spotted with Solas might cause. This might have been the first Inquisition sighting of Solas since his abrupt departure after the fight with Corypheus. Ahrue knew Leliana had scouts across Thedas searching for him, and she suspected that Leliana had a particular interest in keeping Solas away from her. Now here he was at her side, surely a confusing and possibly alarming sight for the three agents. “I will compose a message giving her the details. You may report as your duty requires you.”

Henley nodded, still looking worried. “But… you’re… okay with him, right? Not in any danger?”

Ahrue forced a reassuring smile and shook her head. “He’s no threat to me, Henley,” she said, not knowing if it was true.

Henley sighed. “If you say so, my lady. But, if you decide you need us to… intervene. We’ve got rooms upstairs. I could put a guard on your door.”

Ahrue considered. Having a guard standing outside her room would draw more attention to her presence. But if she’d already been spotted by the Venatori, it would be good to have someone
keeping a lookout. “No one on my door. But keep someone in the tavern, and watch the stairs. The Venatori know I’m in the area and may send people.”

“Of course, Messere.”

“I’ll give you a message for Leliana in the morning.”

“I’ll send the bird soon as you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Henley. And thank the others for me as well. But keep chatter about our presence here discrete.”

“Yes, my lady.” Henley bowed and returned to the tavern, passing Solas on the way.

Solas stepped into the shadows to join Ahrue. “We have a room, and I’ve asked the serving girl to send our meals up.”

She raised an eyebrow. “A room?”

He exhaled heavily. “Ahrue, I am under no illusions concerning where we stand. I intend to sleep on the floor. But you should not be alone with Venatori in the area.”

“You plan to watch me all night?” she asked, irritation edging her tone. It was after all he who had nearly been killed by Venatori the previous evening.

“I plan to sleep at the entrance of the room so none may open the door without striking me. If you also have your agents keeping watch, you may rest certain that no one will take you by surprise.”

She smiled wryly. “Funny, Henley’s biggest worry was that I was in danger from you attacking me in my sleep.”

Solas started. “Me? Why would the Inquisition’s agents suspect that I would harm you?”
“Your abrupt departure inspired a wide range of feelings from people, Solas. Leliana suspects you to be guilty of conspiracy and betrayal. Dorian thinks you a cad. And Cullen… well, I don’t know what Cullen thinks of you, but he definitely doesn’t trust my judgement regarding the subject.”

Solas snorted and rolled his eyes. “Cullen is infatuated with you, so his judgement of me isn’t entirely free of prejudice.”

Ahrue blushed a little on Cullen’s behalf. “My point is that the Inquisition doesn’t exactly see you as harmless, particularly when it comes to me. When I was preparing to leave Skyhold, I was cautioned in no uncertain terms to stay far away from you.”

“I should not be surprised.” He tilted his head and strained his eyes to see her face in the dark. “Do you believe I would harm you?”

“No, not by killing me in my sleep, no. But you’ve actually proven quite adept at harming me,” she said in a flat whisper. “And yes, I do believe you will harm me again. Don’t you?”

Solas’ face went lax and his shoulders slumped. That had hurt him, but he didn’t object. “Come,” he said heavily. “Our room is upstairs at the end of the hall.”

Ahrue followed him up the creaky stairway, down the narrow hall, and to a door marked with the silhouette of a raven. Solas unlocked the door and they stepped inside. Ahrue waved her hand over the lamp by the bed and it lit, illuminating the room. A small bed, a bedside table, and a chair near the door were the only furniture, and the room couldn’t have fit much more. As it was, Solas would barely have space for his bedroll sandwiched between the bed and the door. They dropped their packs in the far corner of the room, and Ahrue sat on the bed which creaked nosily as she shifted removing her armor.

Solas removed his cloak, draped it over the back of the simple wooden chair, and sat down. He sighed, closed his eyes, and leaned his head back against the wall, looking more tired than Ahrue had ever seen him. Their meeting and subsequent revelations had not been taxing for Ahrue alone, it seemed. She wondered when the last time was that he had told anyone about his past. Had he ever? Further, she suspected that the news of her pregnancy had hit him hard. She took some small satisfaction in that.

Dropping her last piece of armor to the ground, Ahrue laid back, letting her legs dangle over the foot of the bed. She rested a hand on her belly, considering the creature nestled within. She was
carrying the child of Fen’harel. She kept repeating the fact to herself, willing the full weight of it to strike her out of her dazed disbelief. The spawn of the Dread Wolf. What kind of story would Varric spin out of that prompt? While finding out the truth about Solas had complicated her feelings regarding the life that grew within her, it also increased the curiosity that had motivated her decision to let it be born. She’d believed that her child was somehow connected to the ancient elves, Mythal, the Well, the anchor, and the Emerald Graves, finding out that Solas was Fen’harel only cemented that belief. She wanted to meet the child they had created, she wanted to see what it would become in the world.

With that thought, a question that she had yet to consider came abruptly to Ahrue’s lips. “Will it be Elvhen?” she asked turning her head toward Solas.

He opened his eyes lazily. “Will what be Elvhen?”

She lifted her head a little and looked at her belly, the swell evident on her small frame in the light attire she always wore under her armor. “Our child. Will it be Elvhen?” she asked again, a little embarrassed by the question, but she wasn’t sure why.

“I do not know,” he said softly. “It is possible. I am not aware if there is precedent on which to base an informed hypothesis.”

A sharp knock on the door made them both jump. “Meal’s here, Sir!” called out a woman’s voice in an Orlesian accent.

Solas stood up and opened the door. He took the tray from the woman, thanked her, closed the door, and placed the tray on the bedside table. Ahrue sat up and looked the meal over. It was simple food: bread, cheese, and two cups of broth. She picked up a cup of broth and sipped it while Solas pulled the chair to the table. He sat down and ripped the bread in two, handing her the larger piece.

He looked at her for a while, eyes lingering on her abdomen, and frowned. “It… must have been difficult for you when you discovered that you were with child.”

To put it mildly. She blanched slightly with the memory of it. The memory of despair. “It was the darkest time of my life,” she said, almost inaudibly.

He took a sip of broth, his face lined with concern. “If you would be willing to share, I wish to
“No,” she said firmly. The trauma of that experience, of what Despair had put her through, what Solas had put her through, was too raw, and her feelings about Solas were too conflicted to trust him enough to share.

“Very well,” he said in perfect stoicism, and dipped his bread in the broth. While his voice betrayed nothing, his face showed his struggle to maintain composure. The muscles of his mouth were tight, his nostrils flared, and his ears reddened.

Seeing the hurt on his face, she felt sorry for the bluntness of her answer. “Give me time,” she said softly.

A shade of a smile softened his mouth. “As much as you need, vhenan.”

Vhenan. The word came so easily to his lips. Ahrue wasn’t sure if he even noticed that he said it. For that matter, she wondered if she always noticed when he said it, or if it sounded so familiar and natural in his voice that it breathed past her unnoticed as often as not. He made no effort to conceal the warmth of his feelings for her, while she tried very hard to purge the extremes of emotions that he sent rippling through her body with each word, each glance, each touch. Hate and love, terror and trust. She felt every moment in double. His use of “vhenan” bothered her in part because the word still had power over her, pulling at her heart, and that power brought the intense polls of her feelings for him to bear.

They finished their meal in silence. Solas got up, fetched his pack and bedroll, and unfurled the bedding directly in front of the door. He held his pack, looking at it thoughtfully for a while before reaching inside and pulling out a bundle of clothing. He turned his back to her as he unbundled the tunic. When he turned to face her, he put his hands quickly behind his back, concealing something, and smiled at Ahrue warmly.

“I have something for you,” he said brightly. Before she could respond with anything beyond a confused look, he was sitting beside her on the bed holding out an ironback halla carving to her.

She took it and turned it in her hands to view the delicate etchings on the sides. She smiled. “This looks exactly like the one I found in Ghilan’nain’s grove!”

“It is the one you found in the grove.” She looked at him incredulously. He laughed. “Do you
recall? You left it Din’an Hanin to make room in your pack for a practical item that you’d come across in the ruin. I happened upon it quite by accident just hours before you arrived to rescue me from the Venatori. If I believed in such things, I would think it providence that I chanced to discover it.”

Ahrue was speechless. She’d been so sad to leave this little figurine behind, this piece of her heritage that she had carried with her for months to look at when she felt lost or out of place. It had reminded her that she would always find her way.

“Ghilan’nain… is worth honoring,” he said gently. “And I thought the carving might be of some small comfort to you in our journey. I am aware that the path you are on has taken turns that you had never expected, or wished for.”

She chuckled at the understatement.

“But, I believe you will find your way, lethallan.”

Ahrue’s eyes began to tear up at the warmth of the gesture. She felt so lost in every sense, and here was the goddess of navigation, Ghilan’nain, to guide her. Not a goddess, really. But a symbol, one that honored a woman who really had been worthy of admiration. Solas’ friend who had stood with him against the tyrannical Elgar’vhen. “You just found this?”

“I almost didn’t notice it. I was clearing away loose rubble to make a place for my bedroll. My hand bumped against it, and there it was. I kept it because it reminded me of you.” He almost put his hand on her thigh as he used to when they would sit side-by-side talking, but he caught himself before he made contact and returned his hand to his own knee. He shook his head. “I know you did not choose this journey, Ahrue, and that you would not remain with me if not for the geas,” he said, his voice tinged with sadness and anger. “If there was a way to release you from it, I would.”

“I know,” she said quietly, and in that moment, she believed it was true. Few things inspired Solas’ temper, but she’d seen him lash out violently in response to subjugation.

Solas’ eyes danced impishly in the lamplight. “Accepting the fact that Mythal will not permit us to part ways, I have an idea for how I might respect your own journey even as you are compelled to be a part of mine.” Ahrue looked at him quizzically. His face was alight with excitement. “You left Skyhold with your own mission: to better understand the knowledge of the Well. If you would allow me, I believe I can help you with this aim. I know of places that may awaken the voices of the Vir’abelasan, ruins almost completely untouched by time or man. Perhaps a two week journey from here, just northwest of Halamshiral there is such a place. I can take you there.”
Ahrue checked the thrill that rose in her as he spoke. “Why would you do that?” she asked in forced skepticism. “It would take us off our course to Sabrae.”

He shook his head and an adoring smile touched his eyes and mouth. “You are important to me, Ahrue. If you wish to be free of me, then we can follow the most direct route available to Sabrae to speed your release. I would understand your urgency. But your quest matters, and I would be pleased if you would allow me to assist you in seeing it come to fruition.” His eyes flashed. “And Mythal could use a lesson in patience. She uses you to speed my passage through the Eluvian. I can only imagine what other purposes might inspire her to make use of her hold over you after the mirror is repaired.” He grabbed Ahrue’s hand and held it tightly, while he fixed her with determined eyes. “We do not have to play her game.”

Ahrue frowned and cocked an eyebrow remembering how unbearable the Well could become when she fought against its pull. “Are you sure about that?”

“No,” he said. “But we could try. You are forced to follow me, but if I choose to follow your quest over my own, Mythal may have little choice but to indulge us.” His smile was wicked, his eyes impish. “I will follow your will, which will indirectly allow you to follow your will. Whether you choose to be free of me quickly or stand with me in defiance of Mythal is entirely up to you.”

Ahrue was caught up in his words. The passion, the drive. He was Fen’haril. He had spent centuries resisting the gods, defying their hold over those they thought they controlled. She could see it behind his eyes, the pleasure and purpose it brought him to remind those in power how tenuous their control really was. Her pulse sped. He would follow her will. He gave her a choice where she thought she had none. Restored her power by letting her govern his will. It was an incredible gift; the little wooden halla paled in comparison.

Ahrue reached out and caressed his face, and his eyes met hers with impossible tenderness. She pressed her cheek to his, feeling the heat of his skin. “Ma serannas,” she whispered tearfully. She pulled away a little to look again at his face.

“No thanks are necessary, vhenan,” he said in a broken whisper.

She nodded and kissed him briefly on the side of his mouth.

He reached out a hand and stroked a tear lovingly from her face. “I should let you sleep,” he said.
The Dread Wolf

Sleep took Ahrue quickly that night. Solas sat on the floor, his back against the door, listening to her slow deep breaths in the dark. Her chaste kiss still tingled on the corner of his mouth. He did not take it as a sign that all was right between them; he knew that eventually her questions would turn to the orb and the Sanctum, and down that path, he saw only rage and heartache. But for now, in the moment when she’d kissed him, she’d truly believed that he cared for her, and she’d been grateful for his expression of that care. It would pass. Daylight would come, the questions would come, Solas would answer, and Ahrue’s mind would turn toward doubt again. But whatever came next, it could not efface the sincerity of feeling between them in the moment of that brief kiss.

The inn had grown quiet. Most of the guests were asleep. When Solas focused, he could feel their minds connecting loosely to the fade. Dreaming. The corners of Solas mouth twitched. His eyes narrowed and then snapped shut as he slipped smoothly into the familiar world of spirits and dreams. For Solas, sleep always came easily. The fade encompassed him on a whim and opened its secrets wantonly.

Ahrue pulled at his mind, and the room around them blossomed into a lush forest. He saw Ahrue as the child she had been: nine or ten year’s old, slight and tall, disheveled hair, face unmarked, and the same storm-filled hazel eyes he loved. A man with white hair and the vallaslin of Elgar’nan towered over her, yelling. Her grandfather, no doubt. “Len’ alas lath din!” the man shouted venomously. “Have I raised you to be a fool, that you would let every foul thing follow you home? Harellan!” The man pulled back his arm to ready a strike.

Solas waved his hand calmly and the man disappeared. Ordinarily he would let nightmares run their course, as all dreams, even unpleasant ones, served a purpose. But Ahrue needed an easy night’s sleep. And Solas could not stomach the sight of the man hitting the child. He hoped this scene was an invention of her unconscious and not a memory.

Young Ahrue lifted tear-filled eyes to Solas. “You are safe now, Da’len,” he told her gently. “You are safe and loved.” Ahrue smiled. A wolf pup peaked out from behind her, tilting its head curiously at Solas. Solas smiled. “Go play with your friend, child.” Ahrue skipped into the woods, the wolf bounding after her yapping happily.

Solas moved on. While he would gladly spend the night sculpting beautiful dreams for her from the substance of the fade, he had more pressing concerns to attend to. He felt the other minds in the inn. The bartender was dreaming of a harlequin stealing her chickens and replacing them with wooden ducks. One of the Inquisition agents was dreaming of a picnic with his wife and children in the sloping hills of Redcliff. A man who was passed out under the table in the tavern was dreaming of drinking a coriander and clove ale. All these minds sleeping in the tavern inn, connected to the fade, spinning stories as they slumbered.
While none pulled at the fade as strongly as Ahrue, he could sense the power of another mage sleeping nearby. For most people, the connection to the fade was loose and passive, but for mages, the connection was stronger, a well-worn path between their minds and the source of their arcane power. Solas followed the pull of the mage’s mind. He passed a child dreaming of being chased by a bear, a young woman dreaming of a night of passion with a cleric, an old man dreaming of winning a diamondback tournament. Then there he was: a human mage dreaming in Tevene. Solas recognized him from the tavern the night before. He’d been sitting at a table alone, dressed in plain clothes, sullenly nursing an ale.

The Man dreamt of a party in the Imperium. He was clustered with a group around a table, his arms around two beautiful women who laughed and smiled as he regaled a story of how he’d bested the so-called Herald of Andraste, slipped poison in her breakfast. He and his friends were all dressed in noble attire. The women called him Lysias as they cooed over his bravery, cunning, and wit.

Confident that this was their man, and bored with the puerile fantasy, Solas swirled his hand and the guests, the decorations, everything in the room spun into a whirl of color. Only he and the mage remained at the center, untouched by distorting winds. The mage jumped and fell backwards, looking horrified at the apparent storm that had suddenly swept away the Imperial palace.

Solas lifted his arms, and a new scene took shape around them: walls, floor, and ceiling of gleaming steel, and a single straight-backed, unadorned, metal chair in the center of the room. No windows, no doors. The light was dim and cast everything in a green hue. Lysias was seated on the floor between Solas and the chair, speechless. Solas ran his finger along the familiar walls, admiring his false reflection. He appeared as a tall human man, wearing a black tailored cloak and hood popular among those of the Altus class in Tevinter. Underneath the cloak, black dragon scale armor clung to his leanly muscled body. His face was angular, his shoulders broad, and his stance was wide and confident.

“Good evening, Lysias,” Solas said calmly with his back toward the man. “Please take a seat.” He gestured toward the chair.

Lysias struggled to his feet, still looking around the room in shock. “What… what happened? Who are you?”

“Please take a seat, Lysias,” Solas repeated.

The man took a single threatening step toward Solas. “What is the meaning of this? I demand to know who you are and what this place is.”
Solas shook his head. The posturing of the entitled, so utterly convinced of his worth that he was unable to imagine anyone not withering under the force of his blustering commands. Solas knew the type. A wall of fire suddenly materialize between him and the man. Lysias jumped backward, shouting. The fire spread, curving outward, forming a ring of flame around Lysias with the chair at the center. Solas took a step forward and the circle shrank, forcing the mage to move closer to the chair. The man raised his arms, attempting to summon a spell himself, but Solas had firm control over this place, so nothing came of it. Cowed by the unexpected impotence of his gesture, Lysias took another step back. The man was not a fool and quickly grasped what the flames were encouraging him to do. He sat in the chair, glaring draggers at Solas who waved the flames out of existence.

“Thank you, Lysias. Now we may begin,” he said calmly as he began slowly circling the room, his hands clasped behind his back. “Why are you in Chalumeau?”

“What business is it of yours?” the mage sneered.

Solas circled behind the man, and placed his hands on the back of the chair. “Why are you in Chalumeau, Lysias?” he asked again. At Solas’ whim, the fade whispered in the back of Lysias’ mind that the man in black was a dangerous man who would kill him if he didn’t cooperate.

Lysias stiffened at Solas’ intimidating closeness and the fear that hovered in his thoughts. “I’m… I’m here in the service of the Imperial Senate. That’s all I’ll say.”

“The entire senate?” he said wryly, his leather gloves creaking as he tightened his grip around the back of the chair. The man in black knows that you are lying, Lysias, the fade whispered. The man in black is dangerous and will kill you if you don’t cooperate.

He began to sweat. “N-no. Magister Halviana directed me to go to Chalumeau.”

“And do you suppose that Magister Halviana made the Archon aware of your… service?” You have dealt with Halviana behind the Archon’s back, and the man in black will kill you for it.

Lysias blanched. “You’re the Blade of the Archon,” he said weakly, his mind offering an explanation for Solas’ identity and interest in his dealings with Halviana. The Blade of the Archon was the head of the Archon’s spy network, known for ferreting out and eliminating threats to the Imperium. His methods were brutal, designed to send a message to those who would plot against their Archon. A suitable misperception for Solas’ purposes that carried with it a fear to which
Lysias was primed to be responsive.

Solas released the chair and resumed his slow circle around the room. “I ask again—and this will be the last time I ask, Lysias—why are you in Chalumeau?” Halviana is a traitor to the Imperium. If you tell the Blade what she planned, the Archon might forgive your involvement.

Lysias pivoted in his chair to face Solas. “Halviana told me to come here. I didn’t know she was keeping it from the archon! I swear it. She told me that once she had the elf…”

Solas’ hands tightened into fists. “Which elf, Lysias?”

“Lavellan. The Inquisitor.”

Solas walked slowly to stand directly in front of Lysias. He leaned forward, placing his hand on the back of the chair just above the man’s right shoulder. Solas’ mouth was inches from Lysias’ eyes. He manipulated the fade to create the sensation of hot breath on Lysias’ face that smelled of rotting flesh. The man tried to pull away, but Solas’ will kept him firmly in place. “Lavellan is no longer Inquisitor. What did Halviana want with her? A Vengeful death for humiliating the Venatori?”

“No, we’re to bring her in alive.” he said, his voice trembling.

“Your compatriots have attacked her outright. A strange tactic if they planned to keep her alive.”

“We all have runes of stasis. We are to bring her to the cusp of death and use the runes to preserve her life. All Halviana requires is a heartbeat.”

“Why, Lysias?” Solas didn’t raise his voice, but his tone had a threatening edge.

Lysias shook his head rapidly, eyes wide with terror. “I… can’t say more! If Halviana found out…” His pitch was panicked, pleading.

Solas materialized a blade in his right hand, identical to the one the Venatori had used on him in Din’an Hanin. He brought the blade to the man’s throat. “What do you suppose Halviana would do
to you that I would not?” He twisted the blade so it scraped roughly against the stubble on the man’s neck. Lysias’ own fear in the Blade of the Archon told him that there was no limit to the tactics this man would do to extract the information he needed.

Lysias swallowed, frozen in fear, eyes unblinking. “She wants to remove the anchor, finish what Corypheus started.”

“The anchor cannot be removed. Even Corypheus knew that.” Solas pressed the blade harder against the man’s throat.

“Th-there’s a ritual. A ritual of transference. Halviana discovered it after Corypheus died.”

Solas was familiar with such rituals. Rituals of transference were briefly popular in Nevarra a few centuries ago. They involved channeling all of the life energy and power from one person to another. The process was always lethal to the victim. Usually the person into whom the power was channeled would be killed by the process as well. Only abominations or people with incredible will could survive the transference. Even if Halviana succeeded in taking Ahrue’s life and power for herself, Solas did not believe that the ritual could succeed in transferring the mark. The anchor was not simply a dimension of Ahrue’s power, it was physically a part of her. But the threat to her was the same regardless of the success or failure of the ritual.

Solas removed the knife from the man’s throat and stood upright. He turned his back to Lysias. “Are you alone in Chalumeau, Lysias?” he asked.

“Yes. I was to wait here in case Lavellan arrived. If the opportunity presented itself, I would take her myself. I would have done it already, but she has guards in the tavern and her room. Otherwise I was to follow her and send word of her movements until reinforcement arrived or until I had an opportunity to take her out myself.”

“Did you send word?”

“Yes. I sent a bird last night. It will be days before reinforcements arrive here, though.”

Good. The Inquisition forces could be alerted, and the Venatori would be eliminated swiftly once they arrived. Assuming no one intercepted their message to Skyhold, that is. “Do you know who your informant in Skyhold is, Lysias?”
“No! I really don’t, sir!” he said, panicked at what the punishment might be for failing to give the Blade the answers he sought.

Solas looked steadily at the man. In the fade, Lysias was convinced that this was real, that the Blade of the Archon would kill him for allying with Halviana. But as soon as he awoke, the realization that it had all been a simple nightmare, a harmless trick of the fade, would set in. He would shake off his fear of the Blade as a dream figment, and his real fear of Halviana and his desire for any reward she’d promised him in exchange for his aid would eclipse whatever lingering unease Solas inspired. He would move against them.

“Thank you for the information, Lysias. You have been most helpful. I wish I could let you go, but… you pose a risk that I cannot abide.”

Lysias fell forward to his knees pleading. “Please, sir! I’ll serve the Archon’s will. I’ll bring the elf to him! He can use the ritual himself! The power of the heavens at his fingertips!”

Solas shook his head. The man cried helplessly, whimpering the word “please” over and over. Solas circled behind Lysias and shaped himself into the form of a wolf, as he had always done in moments such as these. He lunged at the man, the chair between them evaporating in green smoke as he leapt through it. He clamped his jaws bloodlessly around Lysias’ throat. The life left him quickly with a light moan. A mercy. The next day, someone would find Lysias in his bed, cold and stiff, his heart stopped in his sleep.
Ahrue woke in the early morning, just as the sunlight was beginning to come through the room’s tiny window. The bed had not been much softer than the ground she usually slept on of late. But nevertheless, she woke up better rested and less sore than she had been in months. She had none of the lingering unease that she had come to expect in the morning, as nightmares faded back into the ether. And for those first few pleasant minutes of the morning, even the anxiety that had become the norm of her waking life gave her a brief reprieve. She stretched and opened her eyes. Solas was soundly sleeping propped up against the door. Ahrue smirked, envying his ability to just close his eyes and sleep anywhere. She suspected he could sleep standing up, if pressed. Just the same, his neck wouldn’t thank him for holding that awkward position all night. She felt the urge to kiss him awake as she used to: soft pecks on his head until, with eyes still stubbornly closed, he would grumble, good morning, vhenan.

She shivered pleasantly at the memory of what often came after good morning, vhenan. But not that morning. There was still much between them that could not be undone with an oath and a kiss. I will follow your will. The words recalled brought an enlivening thrill. But so far, they were just words. And her kiss was a gesture of gratitude, not a promise and not a sign of forgiveness. No, this morning she would wake him with a word instead of a touch. Ahrue swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. “Solas,” she said softly.

His eyes snapped open so suddenly that she jumped. “Ahrue. Is everything alright?” he asked, completely alert.

“Creators!” she said pressing a hand to her racing heart. “Were you already awake?”

“In a sense,” he said. “I was attuned to my surroundings. In case any problem arose, I wanted to be sure I would not slumber through it. In my time with the Inquisition I grew accustomed to having armed guards attend to our safety while we slept. My encounter with the Venatori in Din’an Hanin was an unwelcome reminder of the risks posed by heavy sleep when one is not in the company of Inquisition soldiers.”

“The Venatori found you while you were sleeping?” she said, feeling relieved that they had stopped to ask him questions instead of just slitting his throat when they’d found him there.

Solas grinned sheepishly. “Ah, yes. The broken ribs you mended were the result of the Venatori’s… nudge to wake me.”

Ahrue winced sympathetically. “Sorry again that you got caught up in that mess.”

He held up a hand. “It is no matter. There is, however, something I need to tell you.”

Ahrue smiled weakly and sighed, remembering what had followed the last time he spoke those words. “Alright. What is it?”

“There was a Venatori agent in Chalumeau. He sent word to his allies, and reinforcements will arrive in days.”

Ahrue raised an eyebrow. “And you know this because you spent the night listening at keyholes?”

He laughed. “That is not far off. I found him in the fade. We… talked. He was quite forthcoming. He also gave me some disturbing information concerning why the Venatori pursue you.” Solas proceeded to tell Ahrue what he had learned regarding Halviana and the transference ritual.
Ahrue frowned, trying not to think of what it would feel like to have all her life and power sucked out of her. “The Inquisition will want to know of this. And they will be better positioned to take out Halviana then we are.”

“You are undoubtedly correct,” Solas said nodding.

“But,” Ahrue said getting to her feet, “we can at least do something about this Venatori agent.” She wriggled her fingers and smiled wickedly at the sparks that coalesced into blue orbs of energy on her palms.

“That will not be necessary,” Solas said calmly, “The agent has been eliminated.”

She dropped her hands to her side, and the energy dissipated harmlessly. “Did Leliana’s people already take him out?” She tried not to sound disappointed.

“No. I did.”

Ahrue looked at him incredulously. “You took him out. By yourself.” Solas was a skilled mage, but his fighting style didn’t exactly lend itself to independent combat.

Solas’ eyes widened. “You don’t believe I could?”

Ahrue laughed. “No. No. I’m sure you could. But I would expect to find you looking a little singed around the edges if you had.”

He snorted. “No doubt, if I had waited for him to wake up.”

“You killed him in his sleep?” she gaped at him, imagining Solas sneaking into the man’s room and slitting his throat without a word. It was hard to picture.

“I killed him in the fade,” he said simply.

The words prickled Ahrue’s skin. Fireside stories of the Dread Wolf devouring people in their dreams came instantly to her mind. Perhaps the myths had some basis in reality. She imagined, as she had as a child, the dread wolf, eyes glowing in the shadows of a dream, stalking her, slavering at the thought of tasting her. It reminded her of Solas’ confession from the day before: there were occasions when I watched from the shadows as you dreamed. She felt a growing sense of fear and vulnerability.

Ahrue chastised herself for being uncharitable. Last night, Solas had done what was necessary, gotten valuable information out of the Venatori, and had eliminate a serious threat without hurting anyone but the Tevinter mage. Still the thought of Solas killing people in their dreams made Ahrue’s blood run cold.

“Does that bother you?” he asked kindly, probably responding to her blanched skin and tightened throat.

She shrugged. “It shouldn’t.”

“But it does.”

She nodded. “It does. It’s not fair to you, but it really does.” She looked at him. His own gaze had fallen to his knees. “Do you do it often?” she asked.

“No. It is not often that enemies sleep in close proximity to me. The farther away someone is, the
more challenging it is to find their mind in the fade. I could search for years and never find Halviana’s dreams.”

“But you were able to connect with my mind through the fade even when you were far from Skyhold.” Her stomach twisted at the thought.

He smiled sweetly. “You are a special case, vhenan.”

That didn’t really make her feel any better. “Because in all of Thedas I’m the one person who could draw Fen’harel’s attention from the fade,” she said it with more vinegar in her voice than she had intended.

Solas tightened his jaw and stood up. He turned from her and put his hand on the doorknob. “Yes,” he said before opening the door and stepping out of the room. The door closed behind him.

Ahrue pressed the palms of her hands to her eyes. “Fenedhis,” she hissed to herself. Why did she keep doing that? Why did she keep doing that? What good did it do either of them for her to throw doubt on his every word? To scorn his feelings for her? She really believed that he honestly cared for her. But that belief made her all the more vulnerable. She’d feel herself being taken in by his words or the softness of a tender smile, and she’d recoil aggressively in an attempt to fortify the wall between them. But the anger wasn’t really intended for Solas. Not wholly anyway. It was herself she was furious with, because every time she warmed to him, she would be struck by that sting of shame that Despair had taught her. She would remember how gullible she was to take his honeyed words at face value. Loving Solas was foolish. Loving Fen’harel was foolish. But here she was thinking about going after him and apologizing. He would treat her to a gentle smile, and forgive her gladly, stroking her cheek with the backs of his fingers. And she would pin him against the wall, his dilated eyes glimmering impishly as she pressed her parted lips to his.

“Fenedhis,” she grumbled again, giving her forehead a few firm taps with the ball of her hand in an attempt to derail the fantasy, a gesture that was quickly echoed by a knock on the door. “Come in,” she called out, glad for the distraction.

Henley stepped into the room, holding a cloth-wrapped bundle in her hands. “Inquisitor,” she said. “I saw Serah Solas in the tavern. He says you passed the night easily?”

“Yes, thanks to you and your people keeping watch.”

Henley’s eyes fell to Ahrue’s abdomen and darted back up to her face. When they had met the previous night, Ahrue’s armor had concealed the scandalous bump that now had Henley blushing. “He… uh… he also said that you might need… um… paper and ink.” She held out both her hands to Ahrue to offer the bundle of supplies. Her eyes rapidly darted between Ahrue’s belly and face again, in an attempt to subtly confirm what she’d seen at first glance. “You know, to… uh… write your message to the Nightingale.”

Ahrue tensed. Always the invasive eyes of the curious. “Thank you, Henley,” she said with as much warmth as she could muster and took the bundle from the young woman’s outstretched hands.

“And you’re sure you’re alright, my lady? Nothing you… uh… need?”

“I’m fine,” she said through gritted teeth as she arranged the writing supplies on the little table. “I’ll bring the message and your materials down to the tavern when I’m finished. You may go.”

Henley bowed awkwardly and left the room. Ahrue imagined her returning to her comrades to
share her first-hand confirmation that the rumors were true: the Inquisitor was indeed with child. She thought of what further speculation spotting Ahrue with Solas would add to the gossip. Regardless, she had no control over the proliferation of rumor, so she focused her attention on her letter. She wrote in small, neat script:

Nightingale,

Ran into some trouble in the Graves. Venatori knew where to find me. Spy, alias “G,” reporting to Venatori from Skyhold using your birds. Additional information obtained in interrogation of a Venatori agent “Lysias” (deceased) in Chalumeau: Magister Halviana is instructing Venatori operatives to abduct me for Ritual of Transference in order to obtain the Anchor. I’m told the ritual would be quite deadly for me. Also, Chalumeau will be getting Venatori reinforcements within days. I’ll be gone before they get here. Inquisition assistance in all matters would be much appreciated.

Ahrue exhaled heavily, thinking of what to say about Solas. The complete story would take much more parchment than a little messenger bird could carry and would ultimately make her allies in Skyhold doubt her soundness of mind. Regardless of what Ahrue wrote, Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine would worry, so she settled on the postscript: I’m with Solas. It’s fine. Don’t worry. She read over the letter again and nodded her satisfaction with its contents before copying it twice more onto two other pieces of parchment.

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Solas poked at the lumpy oatmeal in front of him, trying not to grimace at the texture. He took a fraction of a spoonful on the tip of his utensil and brought it gingerly to his lips. Summoning his courage he quickly put it in his mouth. His self-control failed him and he grimaced and pushed the bowl from him with a distasteful grunt. Perhaps they could forage for fresh fruit once they set out. He knew Ahrue would have nothing to do with oatmeal even when it was passably good, and he suspected she would rather go hungry than even attempt to eat the overcooked mess the tavern served.

Solas rubbed the back of his stiff neck, wishing he had something better than lumpy oatmeal to offer her when she came downstairs. He had not been surprised by how she had responded to his nocturnal activities. Just the same, it hurt Solas to see the fear he inspired. There had been a time when he’d been frightened by his own abilities, when the terror of losing control had kept him awake for days on end. Now he trusted his focus and knew that a stray thought could no more easily kill someone in the fade than it could in the physical world. Intention was a crucial part of the equation in both places.

Solas suspected, however, that the true reason for Ahrue’s response was the realization of her own vulnerability. As much as it pained him to admit, she did not trust him. And while she could easily defend herself against his magic when they were both awake, in the fade, he had the upper hand. The realization of that fact had undoubtedly unnerved her. However, the anchor gave her more power than she knew. She had kept him from her dreams for months without even realizing it. The previous night had been the first time since their shared dream of the Vir’abelasan that she had allowed him access to her mind. He suspected that in nights to come she would not be as open to his presence.

“Serah, Solas,” said a quiet voice, pulling him out of ruminations. Henley was standing at his side looking uncomfortable. “I took the writing supplies you requested to Messere Lavellan.”

“Thank you, Henley,” he said. Henley remained, looking at him. “Was there something else?”
Henley fidgeted as she screwed up her courage. “Serah, I have to ask, what are your intentions with the Inquisitor?”

Solas was taken aback by the bluntness of the question. “Ahrue Lavellan is no longer the Inquisitor. And my intentions are none of your concern,” he said firmly.

Henley stood up a little straighter. “I’m making it my concern. The Nightingale will expect a full report on this, and I intend to give it. And if I think for one moment that you intend to harm Lavellan…”

He chuckled at her boldness. “I will not harm her, of that much I give my word. However, were my intentions nefarious, Ahrue would be more than a match for me. Don’t you agree?”

“Under ordinary circumstances yes! But she’s with… she’s having…” Henley blushed.

“Circumstances are not ordinary.”

Solas could only assume she was referring to Ahrue’s pregnancy. He wondered if Henley had also heard the rumor that he was the father. “I understand,” he said, slowly nodding. “But your concerns are unfounded. Under any circumstances, ordinary or otherwise, Ahrue is capable of defending herself, even against me, if the situation called for it.” Solas leaned in and lowered his voice. “And, please, allow me to offer you a friendly recommendation: do not suggest to Ahrue that she needs your protection. She will not thank you for your concern.”

Henley scowled and nodded curtly before joining her comrades at a table by the bar.

While he found Henley’s questions and worries presumptuous and obtrusive, Solas was warmed by her concern for Ahrue’s wellbeing. She was still well loved by the people. As many enemies as she had, she had more allies to match.

Several minutes later, Solas heard the light creaking of the stairs. Ahrue rounded the corner and nodded at him before walking to Henley’s table. She handed her a bundle that Solas assumed contained the writing supplies Henley had loaned her. Then she handed her three rolled up messages. Solas wondered what she had decided to tell Leliana about him.

“Henley,” she said, tone gravely serious. “These must reach Leliana’s hands. I have written the message in triplicate. I want you to send each message half a day apart, and then send a follow up message asking for confirmation that all three were received.”

Henley looked at Ahrue with confusion. “Yes, my lady.”

“There is a spy in Skyhold who has been using Leliana’s birds. We need to be certain that the Nightingale receives the message even if one bird is intercepted.”

Henley’s eyes widened. “Yes, my lady,” she said firmly.

Ahrue lowered her voice. Solas couldn’t hear her, but he guessed she was telling Henley about the Venatori reinforcements that would be arriving in Chalumeau. The three agents tensed at her words and the dwarf moved his hand to the hilt of his sword as though he expected the Venatori to burst through the door at any second. Ahrue nodded her thanks and farewell to the group before joining Solas at his table.

She pulled his bowl toward her, but quickly grimaced and pushed it away again when she saw what was inside. “Shems sure have strange ideas about what counts as food,” she said with a sigh.

Solas smiled, pleased that he knew her well enough to anticipate her reaction to the food. “The area
is lush; we will find edibles in the forest.”

She nodded, looking out the window behind him. “I’m ready to head out. But, before we leave, I think I owe you an apology.” Her eyes moved to his face.

He shook his head and opened his mouth to object, but she continued before he could get a word in.

“Let me get this out. My feelings for you are… complicated right now, and I’ve been letting that impact the way I treat you. You probably don’t deserve it, and even if you do, it doesn’t accomplish anything.” Her cheeks pinked a little, and she looked down at the table, tracing the wood grain with her index finger. “I believe that you care for me, Solas. But I don’t trust you. It may not be fair, but that’s where I’m at. Just the same, I’m going to try to keep that distrust to myself from now on.”

Solas reached out abruptly and caught her hand in his own. “Do not,” he said fervently. She looked up at him, face lined with confusion. “There should be honesty between us: mine and yours. And if you conceal your distrust from me, then how will I know when I’ve regained it.”

She gave him a doubtful half-smile. “Do you really think you’ll be able to win back my trust, Solas?”

“No,” he said smiling. “But, you have surprised me before.”

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Ahrue strapped her equipment to Dirtharavas and patted the halla’s neck. “I hope you had a good rest, Dirth,” she said smiling. She turned to Solas who was polishing two apples he had just purchased from a fruit vendor on their way out of Chalumeau. “Ready?”

“I am,” he said, walking to her side and handing her one of the apples. “Have you decided where we are going next? Clan Sabrae or Enansal’nan?”

Ahrue took a bite of the sweet, crisp apple. She hadn’t entirely made up her mind. While Solas’ proposition from the night before had considerable appeal, the thought of prolonging her subjugation to Mythal’s will did not sit well with her. Further, she knew that travel would grow more difficult for her as the months passed. She gestured north, the general direction of both Solas’ proposed destination and the port near Hilamshiral where they could cross the Waking Sea into the Free Marches. The three began walking. “Enansal’nan? Is that what this ruin of yours is called?”

“Yes. Blessed Place,” he translated the elvish words. “Although ‘ruin’ is not accurate. It yet stands, preserved from the destructive influence of time and man. It was once a sanctuary for Elvhen, suffused with powerful magic that prevented any violence from being done within its borders.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s a powerful charm! How was it maintained?”

“It is no charm. Spirits maintained the magic of the place long before the Elvhen named it. Before Enansal’nan was built, we called the region Setheneran: land of waking dreams. The veil is thin there, and spirits pass freely between the physical world and the fade.”

“Don’t such places usually manifest when death or violence weakens the veil?”

He nodded. “Usually, yes. But that is not the case in Enansal’nan. There is a story of its origins: a cruel man chased his wife into the woods, planning to kill her for not bearing him any sons. The woman had been running for days when she came upon a large clearing in the woods. She fell to
the ground, exhausted and thirsty. She could hear her husband’s hounds approaching, but was too weak to move. Spirits of gentler natures felt her fear. In that time, the veil was thinner everywhere, and the spirits easily passed into the physical world to come to her aid. They filled the area with their essence, and promised the woman that they would not permit any harm to come to her as long as she stayed in their clearing. When the husband arrived with his dogs and found his wife crying helplessly on the ground, he raised his blade to strike her, but was unable to make the blow. He ordered his dogs to devour her, but they could only bark and whimper. He left, determined to return and kill her the next day. But when he returned, again, he could not strike her, and his dogs could not bite. For three weeks he returned to the clearing each day, and for three weeks he entered that place and found himself unable to harm his wife. He gave up and returned home.

“The woman remained in that place, communing with the spirits who had protected her for many years until word reached her that her husband had died. She left for a time to tell others of the beautiful clearing in the woods where no living creature can harm another, where the broken, beaten, and battered are protected and cared for. Many years later Enansal’nan was built, and the spirits continue to watch over it to this day.”

Ahrue smiled, sorry that the Dalish had not remembered that story.

He looked wistful as he spoke. “Many treaties, great and minor were arranged there, including the agreement between Elgar’nan and Elgara. There was something of a taboo against breaking pledges that were made in that place, as though any vow uttered in the enchanted clearing carried with it the protection of the spirits. From paupers and slaves to kings and gods, all manner of people have passed through the sanctuary of Enansal’nan. No place, no temple was ever more sacred to our people.”

That struck Ahrue as odd. If the place was so honored, there should be traces of it in extant Elven lore. In all her studies of the ancient elves, she had never heard mention of Enansal’nan. Certainly the Dalish did not know everything of the ancient Elvhen, but she generally attributed such erasure to the intentional destruction of elven history by humans. If the place still existed, then certainly the elves would know about it. “I’ve never heard this story or of anything regarding Enansal’nan. Are you sure it’s still there?”

He smiled. “Oh, yes. If you have not heard of it that is because the spirits only permit Elvhen to see Enansal’nan and enter. If a human, dwarf, or elf attempted to approach it, their steps would turn them subtly away, repelled by the protective power of the spirits.”

“But because I’m with you, I’ll be able to see it and approach it?” she asked, trying not to feel irritated that elves were excluded from the heritage that ought to connect them to Enansal’nan.

He turned and looked at her curiously.

“What?”

“I wonder…” he said absently, and Ahrue felt a chill at the intensity of his gaze, like he was somehow looking beneath her skin. “You are unlike most elves of your time, Ahrue.”

She cocked an eyebrow. Solas often called her unique or extraordinary, but she’d always taken it as just a flirtatious remark about her character or beauty. But this sounded weightier. “What is that supposed to mean? I’m no different from any other Dalish mage.”

His eyes widened. “No, you are. The old songs sing in your blood far louder than they do for most. Even more so now that the Vir’abelasan is a part of you. Most elves do magic like human, leaching power from the fade. But you…” he shook his head in awe. “You let the fade sing through you as
the Elvhen did long ago.” His voice dropped and he smiled lightly. “It is beautiful. And it may mean that you can access the power of the Elvhen.”

Ahrue felt another chill at those words. It was disconcerting, but it rang true. Over the past year, she’d felt less connected to the Dalish and increasingly drawn to the ancient elves. On numerous occasions she’d thought of Abelas and the other Sentinels as more kin to her than her clan. Maybe this was why. She looked down at her left hand and traced the hairline scar that cut across her palm. Green light emanated dimly from it. The anchor was created by a relic of the ancient elves, an artifact belonging to one of the Elvhen pantheon. Perhaps it had changed the way she did magic to be more like them.

“You wonder if the mark made you this way,” he intuited.

She nodded. “I can’t think of why else I would use magic differently than most elves.”

“Perhaps. Another possibility is that your connection to the fade has always been unique, and it is precisely because you are different that you were able to use the anchor. Were you a mage who simply ripped your mana from the fade, you would not have been able to channel the power of the mark to manipulate the rifts. The anchor or the breach would have killed you as you attempted to draw the power.”

She snorted. “Lucky for the world that I was the one who stumbled upon Corypheus’ ritual, then. Anyone else and we would have been doomed!” she joked.

“I suspect we would have,” he said gravely. “Perhaps the human’s belief that you were brought to the Conclave by providence has some merit after all.”

She had an unsettled feeling in the pit of her stomach, wondering whose divine hand he saw at work in bringing her to the Conclave. The Maker’s, Mythal’s, or his own? He’d said before that she drew his attention from the fade. Had he recognized something in her that had caught his eye from the shadows of her dreams before their meeting in Haven? Had he steered the dreams of her Keeper to have her send Ahrue to the Temple of Sacred Ashes to ensure that she would be there to interrupt Corypheus’ ritual?

“You look troubled,” he said. “What is it?”

She fixed him with her most determined glare. “I think it’s time you tell me about the orb.”
Solas was quiet for a while, his eyes fixed on the horizon as they walked. With every passing moment, Ahrue’s anxiety grew, his silence affirming her suspicions that he’d hidden what he knew of the orb from the start, that he’d lied to her both outright and through omission about the orb and the anchor that scarred her. Her blood burned hotter the longer he kept his silence until she could tolerate it no longer. She stepped into his path, facing him, forcing him to stop. “After the destruction of Haven, you told me that the orb was Elvhen in origin, that such orbs were connected to the members of the Pantheon,” she said darkly, her eyes daring him to lie. “Whose was it, Solas? Whose orb opened the rift and gave me this?” She held out her palm, and the anchor crackled more painfully than it had in a year.

He looked at her scarred hand, frowning. In a surprise gesture, he pressed his palm to hers, flinching as the mark tore at his skin. “It was not supposed to happen this way,” he said, letting his hand fall limply to his side.

No. She would not allow him to evade. He would answer her directly. She moved closer to him, every muscle in her body tensed to fight him on this. “Whose orb was it, Solas?” she repeated slowly and firmly, knowing the answer with numbing certainty even as she asked it. She needed him to say it.

His eyes fell. “It was mine.”

His words hit her like stones. It was his. He’d known everything about the orb before they’d even met and had spent month slowly revealing bits of his knowledge as though each piece of information was a recent discovery that he had searched the fade tirelessly to recover for her. He’d known what the mark was and had let her agonize for months wondering and fearing where it had come from, what it meant, and what it might do to her. It was part of her, and even now he knew more of it than she. She looked away from him and shook her head. “I don’t understand you, Solas. How you could claim to love me but lie to me every moment… keep things like this from me… How is that love?”

“It felt necessary at the time,” he said softly. “But I am not lying now. Ask me anything you will, and I shall answer.”

She looked to his face, her eyes equal parts anger and heartache. “Tell me everything.”

He nodded. “The orbs were created by the Arcanist Arath’na. One was given to each of the Uth’elgar’vhen. And one was given to each of the seven Shemlen lords, the ones you know as the
The Forgotten Ones. She drew in a sharp intake of breath as her thoughts took focus. “The archdemons,” she said, taking a step back from him. Dumat, Zazikel, Toth, Andoral, Urthemiel, Razikale, and Lusacan. The Vir’abelasan whispered the names to her in a rush. She pressed her palm to her head and winced against the horrific visions of war, disease, famine, and death that bled from those seven names, her head throbbing like the drums of war. “They were… cruel… monstrous… worshiped as gods among men.” Her words struggled as she tried to pull the jumbled and chaotic visions into some semblance of sense while simultaneously shying away from the death and violence that played out graphically in her mind. “There was war.” She clamped her eyes shut in an attempt to block it out, but still the visions of the ancient war between elves and humans raged. Her pulse raced and her breath grew quick and shallow.

Solas touched her arm lightly. “Ahrue, are you all right?”

“So much blood in the streets.” She moaned through gritted teeth as the pain reached its peak. With her eyes still tightly shut, Solas came behind her and guided her firmly with a hand under her elbow and another on the small of her back to a spot a little ways off the road.

“Sit,” he instructed, still supporting her arm.

She sat shakily on the large rock he’d led her to, trying to let its steadiness ground her. She breathed slowly, focusing on the cool roughness of the stone against her palms. With her eyes closed she could sense Solas moving to crouch in front of her. He put a hand on her knee, and she felt an aura of calm spread from their point of contact. The vision and voices began to fade back into the shadows of her mind. Her eyes fluttered open, and Solas breathed a sigh of relief.

“It is the Vir’abelasan that affects you this way, isn’t it?” he asked, an aimless anger sharpening his tone and flaring his nostrils.

She laughed shakily. “You should be grateful; the voices of the Well add to your credibility.”

“I am far from grateful,” he said frowning. “Does it often hurt you like this?”

She shrugged. “It’s fine.” He looked unconvinced but she didn’t want to be diverted from the topic at hand. She tapped her hand impatiently against the rock. “Go on. The war,” she urged firmly. “How does it connect to the orb?”
He shook his head as he lowered himself to sit on the ground. “If you insist,” he said, voice tinged with weariness. “There were two wars of note between the humans and elvhen of that time: one before the orbs were created, and the second long after. The first began because Elgar’nan and Dumat were both childish tyrants whose appetites for power and supremacy could not be sated. As the human empire grew, Elgar’nan felt threatened by the savage Shemlen who pressed at our Northern border. He believed that the humans should be taught their proper place, and Falon’din and Andruil gave him their support. Unwilling to listen to reason, the three ordered their troops to kill or enslave any human in the villages that bordered Elvhenan. So began the Forgotten War. It was short, lasting only one year, but it was brutal beyond measure.”

“I saw it,” she said softly. “Hordes of humans, storming through the cities, slaughtering soldiers and civilians alike. And the children…” she pressed her lips tightly together and shook her head, unable to put to words the atrocities the Well had shown her.

Solas nodded gravely. “Our people were no kinder when they invaded the Shemlen cities, I am certain.”

“How did it end?”

“It became clear, even to Elgar’nan, that the war with the Shemlen was not sustainable. Most on the Uth’elgar’vhen council wished to push the humans out of our lands but had no interest in continuing their invasion of the north. My rebels and many of the common people blamed Elgar’nan for the war more so than they blamed the humans, and they called for him to abdicate the throne as a means to end the violence. Under threat of death and abdication, Elgar’nan had no choice but to capitulate. After much deliberation, I was chosen as an emissary of peace to arrange a treaty with the Shemlen.”

Ahrue furrowed her brow in confusion. “Why you? Elgar’nan didn’t trust you; I wouldn’t have expected him to put the fate of Elvhenan in your hands of all people.”

Solas snorted. “It was in part because he viewed me as an adversary that Elgar’nan agreed to let me try. If I failed, he could place the blame for the continued violence on me. If I succeeded, he could take the credit, knowing that I wouldn’t care enough to fight him on it. Further, he knew that sending me would satisfy the people who were calling for his death or dethroning.” He leaned forward, his eyes flashing. “But the real reason the Uth’elgar’vhen sent me—the reason that Elgar’nan would never admit—was that I had something in common with the seven Shemlen warlords: we were all somniari, a gift the ancient Tevinters saw as indicative of godhood. The Seven would view me as an equal, while they saw Elgar’nan and the others as little more than abominations.” Solas smirked at the memory.
“If you were all somniari, you could have met them in the fade without having to take the risk of crossing into enemy territory.”

He smiled. “Quite so! Somniari are easier to find in the fade than others, as our connection to the fade is quite distinctive, and at the time, there were very few of us in all the world. I was able to track them in the fade after only a few weeks of trying. The first of the Seven I approached was Urthemiel; his mind was gentler than the others, and he was brother to Dumat, so I believed he might have sway over their leader. I was able to convince him that peace was the only way that either of our empires would survive.” A smile ghosted across his face. “I believe it also worked in my favor that Urthemiel was decidedly unnerved by the fact that I had been able to locate him in his dreams, a feat the Seven could not yet replicate, as their powers, while considerable, were still relatively immature and unfocused.”

Ahrue recognized the implied *that would change* that edged his words. She recalled the stories Varric had told her of the first Blight and how Dumat had called Corypheus to invade the Golden City through his dreams. She shuddered.

“One by one, I visited the others in the fade, convincing them of the advantages of peace and the futility of continuing to war against us. Lastly, I met with Dumat whose comrades by that time had already bent to the wisdom of a treaty between our peoples. He was a tyrant who cared far more for his own power than his people, but I was familiar with the type. He needed a material incentive to agree to peace. Thus the orbs were commissioned to mark us sixteen as the recognized leaders of Thedas and of the fade, of humans and elves alike. That satisfied Dumat and cemented the treaty between us. They also marked us as equals; each orb contained the same power as the others, a gesture that carried weight with Dumat, as he rightly believed that the Uth’elgar’vhen looked down on the Seven.”

Ahrue gaped at him, unable to believe the hugeness of the Uth’elgar’vhen’s folly. “Were you out of your minds? You gave the orbs to them? They were monsters!”

“They were not yet monsters, no more so than the Elgar’vhen. Elgar’nan and Dumat were the worst of us, and even they could be brought to see reason if approached correctly.” He sighed. “Also, we were not aware of how dangerous the power of the orbs truly was. They seemed to us to be keys to another realm. A place of intrigue, yes, but of no foreseeable military or political value. We did not have the same wariness of the fade then as people do today.”

“But, of course, it went wrong,” she prompted with a sardonic half smile.

“Indeed. The Seven decided to build themselves a kingdom in the fade, you would know it as the Abyss. They continued to rule over the humans through their dreams, and their returns to the physical world became increasingly rare as they remained unaging in the fade for centuries. The
Elgar’vhen also became enchanted with the power of the orbs. Andruil took to wandering the fade for weeks at a time, as did Falon’Din and Dirthamen. Elgar’nan spent considerable time there as well, attempting to construct a kingdom for himself to rival that of the Seven, but his powers to manipulate that place could not compare to that of the somniari.”

Solas’ face darkened. “Constructing the orbs was a mistake. We did not know that spending time physically in the fade affects the minds of those who dwell there overlong. By the time we realized what was happening, Andruil and Falon’Din had become twisted and cruel, caricatures of the harsh and vain people they had always been. They began using the people as play things and demanding blood sacrifices of their followers. Elgar’nan and Dirthamen had also shown signs of change, becoming increasingly paranoid and aggressive. Elgar’nan would rave that the Seven were plotting to attack him from beyond the veil. And the Seven were no better. When I would visit them in the fade—usually through dreams rather than in person—they would question me constantly about what Elgar’nan and the others were planning, where they were at any given moment, and what their strengths and weaknesses were.”

“Why would they think you would tell them anything? You were Elvhen.”

“They believed that our shared bond as somniari outweighed any connection we may have to our respective races. To them, I was a brother, and…,” he exhaled heavily, “they were my friends, despite our differences. And they knew that Elgar’nan did not view me as friend or equal. Elgar’nan likewise assumed my loyalty was to the Elvhen, my kin, and that I shared his belief that the Seven were a threat to the empire, so he too pressed me for information on the Seven and what they were plotting.”

Ahrue’s blood ran cold, remembering the words of the myth of the Betrayal: Our gods saw him as a brother, and the Forgotten Ones trusted him also. She felt ill with the anticipation. “Is this the part where you trick them all into letting you lock them up in the fade?” she said icily.

“Not quite. That came after Mythal was murdered.”

Abelas had mentioned that Mythal was slain and—Ahrue was relieved to remember—that it had not been Fen’harel who’d killed her. “By whom? And why?”

He frowned. “I do not know. As Elgar’nan, Andruil, Falon’din, and Dirthamen began behaving more and more rashly, Mythal was forced to intercede to prevent them from causing too much harm and inciting full rebellion. It angered them, and they accused her of intentionally weakening the Elgar’vhen so they would be soft and broken when the Seven arrived to destroy us all. Relationships became more and more heated between the members of the council, and a sharp division began to form between those who supported Elgar’nan and those who supported Mythal. Civil war threatened to erupt at any moment.”
His face and voice fell, a pall of grief settling over his every feature. “And then Mythal was found dead with a Shemlen dagger in her back, at her favorite retreat in a small temple that bordered Elvhenan. Elgar’narn claimed that it was murder committed by the Seven. An act of war.”

“You didn’t believe him.”

He shook his head. “I believed that both sides were on the cusp of war. Mythal had gone to that temple before many times whenever she sought to put some distance between herself and her irascible mate. It was easily accessible by humans as well as our people. She could have been killed by an agent of the Seven, or it could have been an Elvhen assassin, or even one of the Elgar’vhen. Regardless, both sides happily seized upon the opportunity to rekindle the Forgotten War. Even the members of the Uth’elgar’vhen who had favored peace in the past, now stood ready to destroy the Shemlen for the murder of Mythal.”

“What about the Seven? Did they deny Elgar’narn’s accusations?”

“The Seven neither confirmed nor denied their involvement in Mythal’s death. They were as eager and mad for blood as Elgar’narn. They emerged from the fade for the first time in centuries to lead their people in a war that would shake the world. The death count rose every day as the Seven and the Uth’elgar’vhen threw their people at one another like Qunari cannon fodder. Entire villages were laid to waste, innocents were taken captive and brutally abused or simply killed in the streets in front of their families. It seemed we would fight ourselves into extinction.” Solas took a deep breath. “It was then that I decided to create the sanctum.”
Solas and Ahrue had resumed their walk northward. She still hadn’t said whether she wanted him to take her to Enansal’nan or not. Solas suspected that her decision hinged on their current conversation, depended on how monstrous Fen’harel really was in his true account of the familiar story. He felt the urge to lie, to spin stories for her that would conceal the impact of his actions, that would make him blameless in the disastrous effects he’d had on the world generally, the elves in particular, and Ahrue personally. But, not only was it likely the Vir’abelasan would alert Ahrue to the truth, telling her everything had become important to Solas, even as it was painful, even as he knew he might lose her forever because of it.

So far, Ahrue had been impressively stoic regarding his political history of ancient Elvhenan. Of course it helped that Elgar’nan and Dumat offered easy foils against whom the much younger Fen’haril seemed comparatively reasonable and sympathetic. But his story was approaching the line he’d been dreading, and upon crossing it, motivations and intentions would be overshadowed by the consequences of his acts.

“You know, I’ve never cared for the story of the Betrayal,” Ahrue said lightly. “The Dread Wolf never seemed to have much of a reason for betraying the Forgotten Ones or the Creators.” She smiled. “When I was little, my grandfather would tell that story all the time. It was his favorite. He actually told it quite well, with the firelight glowing orange on his face, and his voice low, with all us children gathered around him.” Her eyes darted briefly to Solas’ face. “He did a Fen’harel voice that I doubt you’d find very flattering, but it got all the clan children going. Then, one night, probably the hundredth time I’d heard it, he finished, and I piped up loud enough for everyone to hear, ‘Why did Fen’harel lock up the gods?’ My grandfather, used to me asking too many questions, just growled sternly ‘Ahrue’garastu, it does not matter why he did it. For riches or power? For love or vengeance? Nothing could excuse betraying your people.’”

Solas smiled picturing the young Ahrue from her dream the night before, with disheveled hair and curious eyes standing up, coming to his defense, and insisting in front of her entire clan that Fen’harel must have had a reason to lock away the gods.

She continued to speak with great animation. “Well, I didn’t find that answer very satisfying, so I responded, ‘But what if he did it because he didn’t want the Forgotten Ones and the Creators to fight? Or what if he was just playing a joke, and then he accidentally lost the key?’ My grandfather scowled at me. ‘Excuses like these are how the Dread Wolf tricks the People into trusting him and doing his bidding. Are you a servant of Fen’harel that you would spin his lies for him?’”

“What did you say to that?” Solas asked brightly.

She shrugged. “I think I stomped off and cried behind a tree. There wasn’t a point in arguing with
him; he’s always been firm on the importance of loyalty and obedience, rules and tradition.”

Solas laughed, thinking of how poor a pairing Ahrue and her grandfather must have been. “And you were Ahrue’garastu! Storm Bringer!” he said, translating her full name into the common tongue. “Bringing chaos and uncertainty into his ordered world.” Solas had never heard her mention her full name before, but it struck him as fitting.

She laughed. “Almost exactly as he would put it! He would use my full name as a way to remind me when I was bringing trouble or stress to him or the others of the clan.” She smirked and put a hand to her abdomen. “If he saw me now, he would shake his head and say, ‘So, Ahrue’garastu returns, at last. And with a little storm in tow, no less.’”

She smiled through it, but Solas could see in her eyes and her tensed shoulders that her full name spoken by her grandfather carried a judgment with it that hurt her. It was likely why she had shed the second half; “Ahrue” by itself did not carry the same connotations for her as the full name. Solas understood the power of names very well. He also knew this was about more than a name. In some ways her involvement with Solas had confirmed her grandfather’s opinion of her, and her pregnancy stood as testament to that. “Do you believe your people would reject you for baring a child outside of the bonding?”

She snorted. “Shun me? Probably. And, I believe that if they knew that you—that Fen’harel—was the father, I would be lucky if they even waited for the child to be born before dashing its head on the stones. But most likely they would probably just run me through and be rid of us both in a single thrust.”

Solas’ blood went cold and he stood frozen in place. She’d said the words with total frankness. She believed it, believed that her people would slaughter her and their child if they knew the truth of who Solas was. “Ahrue!” he said, not knowing how to respond.

He tensed at her suggestion. “Couldn’t you just claim that I am your husband? That would be a simpler lie, and nearer the truth.”

She shook her head. “You don’t wear vallaslin which means that we didn’t wed according to
Dalish tradition. And claiming that we were married by the Chantry would be taken as an abdication of my heritage, thus weakening my claim to Vir Sulevanin.”

He knew she was right, but thinking of an imaginary husband for Ahrue, even a dead one, bothered Solas. “Whatever you think is best. You know the Dalish better than I,” he said with an edge of irritation in his voice.

She laughed. “If it bothers you, I could always give you vallaslin. You can erase them with magic afterward.”

Solas bristled. “It bothers me that this charade is even necessary!” he said, surprising even himself with his anger. “It bothers me that your own people would shun you for daring to step outside the bounds of ‘ancient’ traditions that they invented or kill you for the sake of foolish superstitions based on stories that they don’t even understand!”

She whirled on him. “And what do you expect me to do about it, Solas?” she shouted. “Arlathan is gone, the Elvhen are gone, and these foolish superstitions, poorly understood stories, and invented traditions are the only things that hold the Dalish together! So of course they hold onto them, of course they defend them, and of course they would see you and me as a threat.”

He realized that she had taken his anger as being directed at her instead of in defense of her. He focused on calming his voice. “Ir abelas. I do not expect you to do anything to change the Dalish. There is much I admire about your people, you particularly. You are the best of them. That they should treat you like you are…” he felt his anger rising again and decided to stop before he would say something else he may regret. He put his hands up to signal that he would say no more.

The rage in Ahrue’s face and body faded to irritation. “Fine,” she said heavily and resumed walking northward. Solas took several long strides to close the distance between them and take his place walking by her side. She glanced at him furtively. “Was it worth it?” she asked softly.

He looked to her, waiting for elaboration.

“I understand why you locked away the Seven and the Uth’elgar’vhen. You were one man against fourteen power-mad, fade-addled demi-gods who were waging a brutal and bloody war over one dead woman. Your people were suffering and dying. The rebels praying at the Fen’haril statue in the Emerald Graves, they were desperate for you to end the first of the Forgotten Wars, and I imagine similar prayers were said to your statues across Elvhenan by people who believed that only you among their gods still cared for their lives and wellbeing. So you did what you felt you had to. But was it worth it?” Her eyes were wide and sad.
Her question struck at the oldest and deepest wound of his life. He shook his head solemnly. “I do not know.”

She nodded with matched gravity. “Tell me what happened.”

“I created the sanctum, or the Eternal City, as you know it.”

“Creators,” she mumbled and ran her fingers through her hair. Solas knew it was a lot to process, hearing the myths she’d grown up with retold by the villain. Just as it was easier for her to think of him as a simple rebel, it was less jarring to imagine the Sanctum as just a cage in the fade rather than the fabled Eternal City. He waited to give her whatever time she needed to let his words settle in. “Keep going,” she said wearily.

“As a somniari, I was able to construct the Sanctum easily in my dreams, and when awake, I could use the orb to access it physically.” Solas felt a swell of pride recalling the domed ceiling, glittering with metallic mosaic tiles, the fresco adorning the walls of the chamber in bold colors, and the intricate Uthenera beds he’d shaped to honor each of the Elgar’vhen. Some of his finest work. It was a resting place fit for gods, destined to house far lesser beings. “Making the sanctum was not difficult, and the Seven had already created the Abyss themselves, so there was no need to construct a second chamber. Sealing fourteen paranoid and violent mages in their respective prisons, however, was not a simple task. My greatest challenge was to create a seal so neither spirits nor mortals could enter or exit the sanctum except with the orbs. In all my journeys of the fade, my studies in the waking world, and my conversations with spirits, there was only one form of magic that I could trust to contain the Seven and the Elgar’vhen safely: a soul seal.”

Ahrue stiffened at his words. “I know what that is,” she said darkly, making Solas’ stomach tighten. “Soul magic was like blood magic, only it drew on soul essence for power instead of the physical body. Like the ritual of transference.” She looked at Solas, face twisted with disgust and disbelief. “You actually used a living soul to generate the cage around the Eternal City? You killed someone to create your prison?”

Solas felt his skin heat at her judgment. “I… killed two. One to seal the abyss, and one to seal the sanctum. However, if it makes any difference, they were willing. I recruited two former rebels—Erani and Malaal—who had taken the eternal sleep of Uthenera in what is now called Sundermount. They had chosen to leave the waking world because of what the Elgar’vhen had made of it.” His face fell with the memory. “And I had failed the rebels too often for hope alone to sustain them. But when I told Erani and Malaal in their dreams of my plan, they agreed to let me take their souls if it would keep the Elgar’vhen from harming the people any longer.” He swallowed the feelings of shame that rose in his throat. “They put their trust in me.”
Ahrue’s expression softened some, but he could see that she was still repelled by his use of Erani and Malaal as sacrifices. She had likely already begun to sense that the cost of his actions exceeded those two lives by far.

“I took their souls into my being, leaving their bodies as empty husks, and I used my orb to bring me first to the Abyss and then to the sanctum. All of the Seven and the Elgar’vhen were waging war in the waking world, so no one would notice as I cast my spells and used the souls of my friends to power barriers strong enough to contain gods and suppress the somniari magic.”

Her brow furrowed. “You sealed the Abyss and the Sanctum before the gods were inside?”

“Yes. The orbs would be used to travel directly within the barriers. Once there, the sleep charm I had set would trigger, and I could collect the orbs from their slumbering bodies, using my orb to depart, leaving the Seven and the Elgar’vhen to slumber eternally.”

“If they would be sleeping forever, why take the orbs?”

He smiled, appreciating the curious and skeptical probing her mind tended toward. “It was a failsafe. I theorized that the fade would sustain my sleep charm indefinitely. But if that were not the case, if the charm should eventually dissipate, or if one of my… prisoners managed to break the hold it had over them, I wanted to be sure that no one could escape.”

Ahrue grimaced slightly. “So how did Fen’harel really tricks his friends and kin into his traps? How do you bait a god?” she said in a tone laced with barbs.

He sighed. “The Seven were easily fooled. They had long been attempting to lure me to betray my kin, making promises that if I helped them take Arlathan and eliminate the Elgar’vhen, they would give me power over whatever remained of the cowed Elvhen Empire. They were eager to believe me when I went to them prepared to betray the Uth’elgar’vhen. I told them of a plan to ensure their and my victory over my kin: I would lure the Elgar’vhen to the fade by telling them that spirits had whispered secrets to me of a great weapon that could destroy the human forces in days. The Seven need only return to their own place in the fade to await my signal and ambush the Elgar’vhen. In the fade, Elgar’nan and the others would have less power than the somniari, and would be easily bested by us.

“I returned with them to the Abyss, presumably to plan our strategy of attack. As soon as we stepped through the rift into the golden halls of their palace, the charm triggered, and they fell asleep.” Solas frowned, remembering each of the Seven suddenly slumping to the ground while he’d stood numbly frozen by the gravity of his betrayal. “I carried each of them to their beds, took
Ahrue tilted her head searching his face. “It bothered you, didn’t it? Fooling them that way?”

He nodded. “Despite their flaws, despite what they had become, they were my friends. I pitied them, but the war could not be permitted to continue, and the fade had twisted them into monstrous versions of their former selves.”

“How did you convince the others?” she asked gently.

“I showed them the orbs, told them that I had trapped the Seven in the fade, but we had to act quickly before they broke away from their cage. I told them I would take them all to the place the Seven were trapped and they could either kill them or agree to a peaceful solution; I no longer cared as long as the war was done.”

“And they believed you because you’d been vocally opposed to the wars from the beginning and had previously threatened to kill Elgar’nan and Elgara to end their civil war,” Ahrue surmised.

“Quite so. I took them to the sanctum. They fell asleep, I carried them to their beds, I took their orbs, and I left.”

Ahrue held her silence for a while, perhaps out of respect for the Creator’s, perhaps mourning their fate, or perhaps just as a kindness to Solas, respecting his grief and shame. The sun was approaching its zenith when she spoke again. “What did you do with orbs?”

“I shattered them,” he said softly. “I even found Mythal’s orb placed upon her corpse in her burial chamber, and I destroyed it. I kept my own intact of course… and there was another.” Solas narrowed his eyes. “Dirthamen had not had his orb with him in the fade. Everyone had entered the Sanctum through the rift I opened, so he hadn’t needed it. I spent… a long time searching for that orb. But after the humans laid waste to Elvhenan, I gave up any hope of recovering it.”

Ahrue grabbed him by the arm, pulling him to a stop, her eyes wide and fearful. “Solas! You’re saying another of those orbs is out there somewhere?”

He smiled weakly at the fact that her greatest fear was his greatest hope. “It is unlikely. Chances are it was destroyed when Elvhenan fell. But it is possible that the orb is still intact. If someone has
“But Corypheus did! What if others like him still exist? They could find the last orb. Corypheus was able to find yours, after all.” Her face was fervent. Solas could see her horror at the thought of a breach tearing the sky again, of the dark future she had so recently bled, sweated, and killed to prevent, coming to pass by the hands and will of another monstrous creature like Corypheus.

Solas looked away. She’d left him an opening, a chance to lie about how Corypheus obtained the orb and be believed. It would not exonerate him of all his crimes, but of all his mistakes, he feared this would be the one she’d be least likely to understand. It was tempting beyond measure to just say, *when I awoke, the orb was gone. I tracked it to Haven, but I was too late to prevent its use. All I could do was offer my aid to the Inquisition in closing the breach.* She would believe him. Really, the lie was more plausible than the truth. And it would be better for both of them if he just said the words.

No, he corrected himself, not better. Easier. Solas found his resolve in the firmness of her grasp around his arm. She held onto him tightly, desperate for Solas to convince her that the other orb would not be found as Corypheus had found his. Solas shook his head slowly, knowing she would soon release his arm and step away from him, in horror or disbelief. He forced himself to speak, his voice wavering: “Corypheus did not find my orb. I gave it to him.”
Leliana pushed open the door to her old room at Skyhold, and dropped her traveling pack to the floor with a sigh, equal parts exhaustion and bliss. She had only been away for a few weeks, but it had seemed like months. In the short time she had lived in Skyhold, the place had come to feel surprisingly like home. Leliana had spent the better part of her adult life moving from place to place, rarely spending more than a week in one city before duty or intrigue would pull her to the next. In the past, she’d had no desire to be rooted to any one place, but near the end of her month-long stay in Val Royeaux, she had felt home-sick for the smells, sights, and faces of Skyhold. Granted, most of her favorite faces were gone now, but, with the birds of her rookery flying back and forth to every corner of Thedas, none of them were really out of her reach.

The journey home from Val Royeaux had been long and exhausting, and it had been well past sundown when she’d finally rode through Skyhold’s gates. Her legs and back ached from too many hours spent astride a horse. Sleep pulled at her every muscle. She smiled lazily to herself, stroking the satin coverlet of her four-poster bed, imagining slipping beneath the blankets letting her head sink into the soft downy pillows. What she needed was a long uninterrupted sleep.

Schmooples trotted into the room behind her, his short legs working double-time to catch up. He pawed at the dangling edge of the bedspread and squeaked. Leliana laughed and scooped the nug into her arms giving him a kiss on his prominent nose. “Is the bed too high for you, my darling?” She placed Schmooples lovingly on the bed. “I’ll just have to ask Harritt to build you some stairs!” she said while smooshing his face.

“From making weapons for the Inquisitor of Thedas to building step ladders for nugs,” said a voice behind her. “I can hear Harritt grumbling already.” Leliana turned to see Cullen smiling warmly at her from the threshold. He looked almost as tired as she felt.

“Inquisitor Rutherford,” she said bowing dramatically before hugging him.

“Maker. Please don’t call me that,” he groaned, patting her on the back awkwardly.

“And why not?” she said, releasing him and stepping back. “I’ve heard only good things about you since you assumed the role. It has been a smoother transition than we could have hoped for.”

Cullen scoffed. “Smooth. Certainly hasn’t felt smooth.”
Leliana sat on the edge of her bed and folded her arms. “There were bound to be some bumps. But Josie tells me that we have lost very few supporters since Ahrue left.” Cullen’s jaw briefly tightened at the mention of Ahrue’s name.

“Due to Josephine’s skill, not mine. But the support we’ve retained has been less vocal and… well… supportive. I don’t inspire quite the way Ahrue does.”

Leliana laughed, remembering the sight of him rallying the troops of the Inquisition with a presence so commanding and stirring that it gave any who listened chills at the pride and courage he evoked. “Don’t be ridiculous! For someone who doesn’t have the benefit of being marked as Andraste’s Herald, you have done remarkably well at inspiring the masses! Besides, you’re still the talk of the Orlesian court.” She smiled slyly. “You’ve captured many hearts.” But not the one he wanted, she suspected.

Cullen tensed, refusing to give an inch. “Regardless, I’m glad you’re back. I need all the support I can get. I expected you to remain in Val Royeaux to help Cassan—I mean, Divine Victoria.” He laughed to himself at his slip. “It’s strange. I grew up poor in Honnleath—a tiny village, little more than a pinprick on a map—thinking I would never see the world beyond the town’s gates. Now I’m here and on a first name basis with the Divine.” He shook his head and chuckled. “It’s certainly an adjustment.”

“More so for her,” Leliana said with a smirk, thinking of Cassandra fidgeting in the Sunburst Throne while clerics droned at her. “Cassandra was already feeling restless before I left. I’m sure she’s climbing the walls by now.”

Cullen leaned against the door jam and folded his arms. “Well, we haven’t received any reports of Clerics being run through or the Divine escaping into the night in full armor, so I’d say she’s doing rather well.”

“Give it time,” Leliana teased. She wasn’t bitter about Cassandra being chosen for the Sunburst throne. She knew that with the rebellion of the mages and Templars so recently disrupting the lives of many in Thedas, a Seeker inspired a sense of security that a spy-master could not. And, despite Leliana’s jests, she knew Cassandra was equal to the task of rebuilding what ought to be rebuilt, reforming what needed to be reformed, and abolishing what no longer served a useful purpose. But, as Cullen had said, it would be an adjustment.

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The next morning, Leliana resumed her duties as Inquisition spy-master. Her agents had done well
in her absence, but they didn’t see the larger picture, the way seemingly discrete events connected, and the long term and long reaching effects of even apparently ordinary occurrences. For two days she poured over the intelligence her people had gathered while she was away, trying to find what they might have missed. When Cullen and Josephine walked into the war room, she had reports strewn across the table and string laced around nails that she had hammered into the map.

“I should have known you were up to no good when I saw you with the twine this morning,” Josie teased as Cullen gaped at the mess she’d made of their table.

Leliana smirked but kept her eyes on the web of string she was constructing. “Do you have any idea how many reports my agents send in the course of a month? I have a lot to catch up with.”

“And why exactly does reading reports require string and nails?” Cullen asked.

Leliana pointed at a nail she’d hammered into Markham. “Lord Barion’s cook falls ill and is replaced.” She traced the path of string connecting Markham to Denerim. “King Alistair’s steward repeatedly comes to work drunk and is replaced.” She traced another string to Val Royeaux. “Empress Celene’s lady in waiting is caught stealing. She is imprisoned and replaced.”

“Is that really so remarkable?” Josie asked. “Even at Skyhold we must occasionally replace servants.”

Leliana shrugged. “You may be right, but there is a pattern of servants in key positions being replaced in noble houses and military installations across Thedas in the last five weeks. It may be more than a coincidence.”

“You believe it’s the emergence of a spy network? Assassins?” said Cullen.

“It is possible,” said Leliana, stepping back to get a better look at the web of string. “I’d like a list of all new hires at Skyhold, going back… three months. If this is a spy network, they would have undoubtedly placed someone here.”

“Very well,” said Josephine wearily, making a note to herself. “But interrogating our new staff will hardly be beneficial to morale. And sometimes a cook is just a cook.”

And sometimes a cook is an assassin. A knock came at the door before Leliana could respond.
“Come,” Cullen called out.

The door opened and Agent Ritts entered. “My apologies for interrupting,” she said with a little bow. “But I believe you’ll want to see this.” She held out a message to Leliana.

Leliana took it. She recognized the handwriting instantly. “From Ahrue,” she said.

“What does it say?” said Cullen eagerly.

“Give me a moment.” She read. “Ha! We do have a spy!” she said triumphantly to Josephine, slapping her hand to the table before resuming reading. “Venatori in the Dales… Magister Halviana… Ritual of transference,” she mumbled as she scanned the letter. She looked up at Cullen briefly. “We’ll need to send Inquisition forces to Chalumeau.” Then she arrived at the postscript. Leliana’s nostrils flared. “She’s with Solas,” she said flatly, tossing the message to the table. She felt the bite of her failure. Her people should have found him before Ahrue did.

“She wouldn’t,” Cullen said, picking up the letter and reading it through himself. “‘It’s fine. Don’t worry?’” he quoted sneering. “That’s it?”

Josephine took the letter from him and read. She smiled wryly as she came to the end. “Lavellan was never entirely forthcoming about her personal affairs. But you don’t truly believe that Solas would harm her, do you?”

“No more than he already has,” Cullen grumbled. Leliana sensed this news carried a particular sting for him.

Josephine’s eyes brightened hopefully. “Perhaps he sought her out to make amends for past wrongs.”

Leliana stifled a derisive laugh. Sweet romantic Josie, so eager to see love triumph. “That seems unlikely. But, regardless, it is out of our control.” She leaned forward on the war table and looked at the map of the Tevinter Imperium. “We can, however, find out more about this Magister Halviana.” The question was how. The Inquisition had some connections in Tevinter but not many. “Has Dorian arrived in Tevinter yet?” she asked.
“Not yet,” said Josephine. “His travel plan has him scheduled to arrive in the Imperium in…” she checked her notes, “another week.”

Leliana sighed. A long time to wait. “See what our noble contacts in Tevinter know about the Magister,” she said to Josephine. “In the meantime, I’ll see if I can find out who this ‘G’ is.”

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Solas’ words washed over Ahrue like ice water. The initial shock as it hit her was intensely painful, her entire body and mind rebelling against the truth. But as he continued to speak, the shock was replaced by a numbness which gradually spread through her entire being. While she heard his words clearly, understood their meaning, she was untouched by them. Each syllable only acted to deepen the freeze that protected her against the pain they threatened.

“I was deep in Uthenera when I felt the sanctum’s seal weaken,” he said, voice edged with desperation. “I awoke in a panic. I had not planned for this; the soul seal should have lasted indefinitely. When the ancient magisters broke my seal on the Abyss, corrupting the chamber, and initiating the first blight, I did everything in my power to ensure that nothing would ever reach the sanctum.”

Ahrue considered his words with detachment. The Forgotten Ones were indeed the archdemons, the Blights and all the death and destruction they had caused an unintended result of Solas’ actions. His efforts to end the Forgotten Wars had not prevented the fall of Arlathan, had not prevented the fall of the Dales, had not protected elves from slavery, death, displacement, and loss of heritage. What was the point of it all?

“I had cut the Sanctum off from the rest of the fade. Only two paths could lead there: the orb or the Eluvian in the Temple of Mythal that would open the path only to an Elvhen who knew the key phrase. But the weakening of my seal on the sanctum was not the work of mortal, spirit, or god. I had simply been wrong about how long the seal would last. After millennia, it was wearing out.”

He’d been wrong. He’d been wrong about a lot.

Solas continued, “If the seal broke, the effects would be uncertain. It could cause another blight, with seven more archdemons to fuel centuries of destruction and pestilence. In the best scenario, it would release the Elgar’vhen from the sanctum exactly as they were when I imprisoned them: fade-addled, power-mad, tyrants.”

He didn’t need to add that the Elgar’vhen, upon waking, would have a personal score to settle with
him, and they didn’t seem the merciful sort.

“Or the effects of the broken seal could be something else entirely. There was no precedent to judge by, save the magisters’ corruption of the Abyss. My only hope was if I woke them, perhaps I could curb their base natures. I could tell them a lie that would direct their anger at the Seven. Without an Empire at their command they would not be able to resume their war against Tevinter, and unless they intended to foray into the deeproads, their feud with the Seven would be effectively dead.” He frowned. “Perhaps awaking to find themselves utterly defeated, Elvhenan crumbled beyond repair, vengeance an impossibility, they would… be something different.”

His voice was pained, but Ahrue still felt numb. *I should care*, she thought to herself. *I should be angry or afraid. I should want to hit him or comfort him.* But the more Solas said, the less she seemed to care. She wondered if this was how it felt to be one of the Tranquil.

“So I decided I would use the orb, enter the sanctum, and wake them.”

He decided to wake them. *He* decided. She wondered how he’d come to the conclusion that the choice should be his and his alone.

“But when I tried to use the orb, I could not summon the necessary power to activate it. I was too weak from decades of slumber, and magic had become less a part of the waking world than it had been in the days of Arlathan.” His face and tone fell. “In my desperation, I sought out Corypheus. His power was considerable, and I believed I could manipulate him by playing on his lust for power and his devotion to the Old Gods. I could convince him that I had discovered a way to enter the Golden City safely to free Dumat and the others. If he could activate the orb, I could take us to the Sanctum, the sleep charm would trigger, and I could wake my kin with a target for their rage ready at hand.” Solas sneered. “I fully expected Corypheus to attempt to betray me, but I believed he would let me lead him to our destination before he tried to kill me. After all, without me as a guide, he would have no notion of how to direct the orb’s power to find the Golden City.” Solas’ lips twitched in a scowl. “I underestimated his arrogance.”

And overestimated his own ability to manipulate people.

Solas’ face flushed and body tensed. “He took the orb and cast me violently aside. Left me for dead. I tracked him to Haven, but by the time I arrived it was too late. I saw the explosion of the Temple from a nearby village.”

More lives lost as a result of his actions. She wondered how many deaths in the world could be tracked back to Solas. Five blights, the war with Corypheus, perhaps even the fall of Arlathan and the Dales, all traceable back to this man and his well-intentioned choices. He’d said he was unsure if his actions had been worth the cost. He was lying to himself.
Solas suddenly took her hands, holding them firmly. His eyes were glassy, his face lined with grief or guilt or fear. “It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.”

“Well, it did.” Her words were abrupt and hard, her face carved in stone.

His eyes widened and his chin quivered slightly. “Ahrue,” he said unsteadily, shaking his head and holding her hands even tighter.

She thought about pulling away from him, but didn’t see the point. “I’m not sure what you expect me to say, Solas,” she said without a flicker of mercy. “From everything you’ve told me, it sounds like you’ve been so focused on protecting the world from the Seven and the Elgar’vhen, you didn’t stop to consider that perhaps the world needed to be protected from you as well.”

Solas released her hands and staggered back from her. She recognized the expression he wore; she’d seen it on the faces of men and women who’d just taken a fatal blow in a fight, and had only to await the slow agony of bleeding out before death mercifully released them.

She had no compassion or anger left for him. But his story had given her a sense of urgency. The seal could not be allowed to break. “The sanctum’s seal is still weakening?” she asked him coldly.

He nodded.

“And you’ve discovered a way to restore the seal?”

He remained quiet and looked to the ground.

She took a step toward him and said again in a voice free of anger, “Can you restore the seal, Solas.”

He returned his red, brimming eyes to her face and nodded curtly.

“Good,” she said, turning from him. “We have a long journey to clan Sabrae, and an even longer one back to the Arbor Wilds to fix the Eluvian. Let’s not waste any more time.”
The Iron Bull leaned back in his chair and stretched, enjoying his view of the tavern. The Herald’s Rest was bustling. On the other side of the tavern, a wicked grace tournament was in full swing, and some young women near the bar kept shooting Bull furtive glances and whispering to one another, all smiles. He grinned and waited for another woman to turn his way before treating her to an eye-full of the Bull’s bouncing pecs. She clasped a hand to her scandalized and titillated mouth. “Oh, you know you want to ride the Bull,” he growled quietly, well out of her earshot. The girl giggled and whispered to her friends. “Don’t worry, ladies. There’s plenty of Bull for everyone,” he added in a whisper as the other girls looked his way with shy smiles.

“Think you can manage to keep enough blood in your brain to finish up this meeting?” Krem said from the other side of the table, leaning slightly to his side to obstruct Bull’s view.

“Are you still here?” Bull grumbled.

“Come on, Chief. All the girls and boys in Skyhold are only going to remind you of who they’re not.”

Bull tensed at the suggestion. “Careful, Krem,” He warned, leaning forward and glowering at his lieutenant. Dorian was off limits.

Krem chewed on his tongue and smiled. “Now hacking bandits to pieces with giant axes? That might make you forget.” His eyes twinkled devilishly.

Iron Bull grunted. “Get on with it.”

“Happy to, Chief,” he said brightly. Krem pointed at his rough sketch of Calenhad that was spread on the table between them. “The bandits are holed up here, in the Spoiled Princess. But they’ve been keeping men here, on the gates, and here, at the docks.”

“Fine. We flank them. Cut right through here and here,” he said tracing a path from the right and left sides of the map toward the gates and the docks.

“Sure,” Krem said sarcastically. “Trouble is, those lines you just passed right over with your fingers, those are walls.”
“What?” Bull pulled the map toward him and leaned in close, tilting his head to get a better view of Krem’s drawing with his good eye. A thin wavering pencil line marked the boundaries of Calenhad. “You call that a wall?”

“Sorry my wall isn’t wall-ish enough for you, Bull. I figured labeling it would clear up any possible confusion,” he said, tapping his finger against the word “WALL” that was clearly printed at numerous points along the thin grey line.

Bull rolled his eye. “Fine, fine. Rocky can take out your ‘wall’ as a distraction with Grim, and the rest of the Chargers can go through the main gate and take them from behind.”

“As much as I know you’d enjoy ‘taking them from behind,’ I had another idea,” Krem said, smirking.

Smart ass. Bull laughed and waved for him to continue.

“We can approach the wall here,” Krem said, pointing at where the southern part of the wall met the lake. “And we can use reeds to breath underwater while we swim in.” As he spoke, he traced a path through the western edge of the lake to the dock. “We’ll pull those guys in. Won’t know what hit them. It’ll be easy work to flank the boys at the gate from there.”

“Uh, Krem,” said Bull lazily. “Have you ever seen a Qunari swim? It’s bad.”

“Well, good thing you’re not Qunari anymore,’ said Krem cheerily.

Bull stood up and rounded the table. “Yeah, yeah.” He rubbed his knuckles into Krem’s hair while the youth tried to duck out of his reach. “We’re doing it my way. Tell the Chargers we leave for Calenhad at dawn.”

“Sure thing, Chief,” he said, smoothing his hair with one hand and rolling up his map with the other.

Bull smiled down at him. He loved that snarky vint, even if he did hassle Bull about Dorian too much, gave him more lip than the rest of the Chargers put together, and didn’t know how to draw a
decent map. Bull may have lost the Qunari and said goodbye to the Inquisitor and Dorian, but at least he still had Krem and the Chargers.

Bull heard the floorboards of the upper level creak, and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He was being watched. He looked up to see Leliana leaning on the banister smiling at him. She nodded in the direction of the stairs. Something was up. Bull rested his hand on Krem’s shoulder. “On second thought, Krem, why don’t you lead this one your way. I’ve got a feeling I’ll be busy with something else.”

Krem shrugged. “You say so, Chief.”

Bull walked up the stairs, the floorboards groaning under his weight. He got to the second floor and looked around. No Leliana. He made his way to the top floor. Leliana was sitting in the shadows watching him from behind a table. She gestured for Bull to take the seat on the opposite side of the table. She was positioned so she could see all the exits and the stairs. He’d rarely seen her with her back to a door. Bull always had the feeling that Leliana had trust issues. She’d probably been betrayed young and often to be so cautious even around friends. Still, Leliana looked even edgier than usual. “Hey, Red,” he said as he approached her table and took a seat. “I’ve barely seen you since you got back from that Chantry deal. How’ve you been?”

“Busy,” she said, somehow managing to pack both warmth and iciness into that one word.

Bull rubbed the back of his neck. “You want to tell me about it?”

“I heard from the Inquisitor.” She said the words with a gravity that worried Bull beyond what he would let show.

“She okay?” he asked casually.

“She is with Solas.”

He laughed, relieved. “Of course she is.”

Leliana cocked her head. “You knew?”
“Sure,” he said with a shrug. “Well, didn’t ‘know’ exactly. But I had a feeling that they wouldn’t stay apart for long.”

“You don’t believe he is a threat to her?”

Bull snorted. “A threat? You serious? Like kill her or something? Nah. But even if he tried, I’m pretty sure Ahrue could take him.” He laughed. “I mean, can you imagine Solas, trying to take her out? I’ve watched her solo a dragon while the rest of us were on the ground just trying to keep our insides on the inside. Solas starts something with Ahrue, he’d be a crisp before he could even dent her barrier!” He continued to guffaw, but Leliana’s stony expression, made him stop laughing and clear his throat awkwardly.

“There is more. It appears there is a spy in Skyhold who informed the remaining Venatori that Ahrue would be traveling to the Graves.”

Bull’s expression darkened at those words. “The Venatori. They have the big angry red guys with them?” Fighting Solas was one thing, but the Venatori tended to travel with red Templars as back up. Ahrue was good, but if some crazy meatheads had a vice-grip on her magic, she wouldn’t be much more than a scrawny elf in light armor.

“I do not know. She was… brief in her message.” Leliana tensed. She was worried. Really worried.

She slid a piece of paper across the table. Bull picked it up. It had five names on it. “These your suspects for the vint spy?” he asked.

She smiled slightly. “Yes. You used to locate spies and defectors for the Ben-Hassrath, did you not?”

He nodded slowly. “You got anything more to go on?”

“Very little.” She handed him a rolled up message. “Ahrue’s report.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s it? I thought you kept records of every time someone so much as takes a shit in Skyhold. All you got is names?”
“I was away when these five were employed. I have already eliminated many suspects from consideration.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said and started to stand.

“Do not tip your hand,” she said firmly.

He snorted. “You’re kidding me, right? Ben-Hassrath, remember?”

Leliana smirked. “If memory serves, you confessed to being a spy to the Inquisitor within minutes of meeting her. It would not be prudent to be so forthcoming with your targets now.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find the spy,” he said, stepping away from the table, list of names and Ahrue’s letter in hand. Such tasks were comforting for Bull, familiar. And helping Ahrue, even from a distance, that felt good.
The firelight flickered wildly, casting dancing shadows on the walls of the cave. Ahrue shivered involuntarily as a draft hit her damp hair and clothes with biting cold. It was the rainy season in the Dales, and the past two days had certainly delivered. All of their travel equipment and clothing were soaked through. The night before, they’d been lucky enough to find an abandoned hunter’s shack to camp in. The roof had been leaky, but it had been better than sleeping on the wet ground. Now, the small cave provided a shelter that didn’t leak, but the open mouth of the cave let in every gust of wet wind that blew in their direction. The fire between Ahrue and Solas was magically sustained by necessity, as the wind and wet wood of the forest were not conducive to building and maintaining fires.

Solas was busy spreading out the contents of his pack on the cave floor, no doubt hoping to avoid the mildew and water damage that the weather threatened by exposing his belongings to the heat of the fire. It seemed a futile effort with the wind blowing rain into their shelter every few seconds. Lately Solas had shown a preference for keeping his hands and eyes busy whenever they paused from their journey. Whenever he knew she was watching him, that is. It reminded Ahrue of how he had behaved toward her months ago after he had ended things between them. He was trying to allow her as much space as he could, given the limits of their necessary companionship. He kept several strides between them as they walked and spoke to her only when necessary. It had gone on like this for five days, ever since he’d told her about Corypheus and the orb.

The numbness she’d initially felt when he’d told her about giving Corypheus the orb was now part of a complex tapestry of fraught emotions that weighed on her heavily. Mostly she felt sad and tired. She didn’t hate Solas, at least not for longer than a few minutes at a time. It would have been easier if she hated him. Instead she found herself mourning the man she had loved, a man who had never really existed. Solas’ presence was a painful reminder of the beautiful fiction that had existed between them, but had been based on too many lies to call it real.

Solas had been impacted by the final shattering of his carefully constructed fiction, as well. Perhaps he too mourned the man he’d pretended to be. He’d looked so completely crestfallen over the past few days that Ahrue had to pity him. She knew she hadn’t given him the response to his confession that he had hoped for. But honestly, how had he expected her to act upon discovering that he had been responsible for the deaths of so many? That he had lied to and manipulated her from the very beginning? That he had trusted Corypheus enough to give him the orb, but hadn’t trusted Ahrue enough to tell her the truth? He had abandoned her rather than trust her. And even now that so much of the truth had come out, she had a sick feeling that he was still hiding things from her. But Ahrue had finally managed to sate her ravenous curiosity and had no interest in asking any more questions. If Solas had directed her to the conclave, orchestrating the circumstances that led to her receiving the anchor, she did not wish to know. She already knew more than most could live with.

Another draft gusted through the mouth of the cave, and Ahrue shuddered. Solas did the same, and Dirtharavas stomped her hooves in displeasure in her place as far to the back of the cave as she
could get. Ahrue looked to her right at the torrential rain pouring outside, the lightning cracking. They were lucky it wasn’t any colder. If the temperature was fell more than a few degrees, paired with the wind and the wet, they would be facing the risk of freezing to death.

A slight smile played on Ahrue’s lips as an idea occurred to her. She touched her left index finger to the ground, and focused her mana through it. She slowly drew her finger straight upward, drawing the moisture of the air into crystalline structures. A thin tower of ice took shape, following the path of her finger. The high humidity and wind chill made the ice nearly effortless to form. “Solas, put out the fire.”

He raised an eyebrow but obeyed. The fire and the small amount of warmth it had generated snuffed out with a flick of his wrist.

Ahrue stood up and dusted off her backside before approaching the mouth of the cave.

“Are we leaving?” he asked apprehensively.

“No. Stand back.” She held her arms out, angled toward the bottom opposing corners of the cave mouth. As before, she focused on structuring the moisture in the air and on the ground. The corners where the cave walls met the ground began to glitter with frost.

“Clever!” said Solas brightly from behind her.

She slowly drew her arms toward the center of the cave mouth, a wall of ice building from the lower edges, inward and up. Once she had a good base formed, she stepped to the right edge of the cave mouth and put her hand on the ice wall directly. She focused her energy, pulling in the rain from the other side, and freezing it as it made contact. She walked along the wall, sweeping her hand across the surface, building and strengthening it as she went, leaving a hole in the upper left corner to allow air to circulate through the cave.

Ahrue stepped back and smiled, admiring her work. Already the cave was considerably warmer, the wind and rain held back by her thick wall of ice. She turned to Solas who was also smiling at her wall. “Now that it’s nice and thick, I think it can handle a little heat from a campfire.”

He nodded and restored the fire. The cave was flooded with the warm, orange light.
The only remaining chill came from the wet clothes still clinging to her shivering skin. Ahrue bit her lip. She wanted to remove the clothes, lay them flat on the stone to dry, and scoot in close to feel the fire’s warmth, the heat drawing the damp cold from her skin. But she felt awkward about disrobing in front of Solas.

As though reading her thoughts, Solas spoke haltingly, “Ahrue… it… would be prudent…” he said, tugging at his clinging wet tunic, “to… um…”

She sighed, resignedly. “I know.” She blushed and began unfastening the clasps of her clothing. She caught Solas following suit in the periphery of her vision, pulling his tunic over his head and arms. Ahrue slipped her shirt off and let it fall with a wet slap on the stone floor of the cave. Her pants clung stubbornly to her, and she had to sit on the ground and slowly tug them down her legs little by little to get them off. Gratefully free from her wet clothes, Ahrue felt considerably warmer. She spread out the garments so the heat would make contact with as much of the fabric as possible. She tried to ignore the feeling in the back of her neck that Solas was watching her.

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Solas had not meant to stare. In fact, he had specifically intended not to look at her, both to avoid making her uncomfortable and to avoid increasing the already considerable desire he felt in her presence. But in a moment of weakness, he’d allowed his eyes to drift to her form. The sight of her took his breath away as she always had. Her body had changed some since the last time he’d seen her unclothed: she was thinner in places, the bones of her ribs and back more prominent than he remembered, while her breasts and belly were fuller. His heart sped as he surveyed in a mix of alarm and tenderness the physical results of their relationship.

He’d spent the past week trying not to think about the child that would be born in a few months. But looking at Ahrue now, he wondered what she would look like as the pregnancy progressed, imagined her braced with gritted teeth against the pain of labor. He thought of her sweat-drenched and crying as she brought their squalling child to her breast for the first time. He wondered what gender it would become, if it would inherit Ahrue’s stormy hazel eyes or his steely blue, her dark hair or his copper red, if it would hate oatmeal or tea. He thought of the magical gifts it would surely develop with two mage parents, and wondered if it would grow up in a world where mages were feared and caged, or if their efforts with the Inquisition had been enough to ensure their offspring could practice magic in safety and freedom. And for a moment, he dared to imagine that child accompanied by a sibling, planned for and desired by parents that had, through all the obstacles and struggles, found their way back to one another.

Solas gasped audibly at the pain of wanting, his fantasy jarringly contrasted against reality. He would never meet their child, and if a sibling ever arrived, Solas would not be the man who fathered it. He would enter the Eluvian and never exit. And Ahrue would be glad of it. The world and she would at last be safe from Fen’harel.
Ahrue stopped arranging her clothes on the ground and faced him. “Problem?” she asked, her tone and flared nostrils delivering a sharp warning to divert his eyes.

Solas’ ears reddened and he quickly looked to the ground. “My apologies. I should not have stared.”

“Then why do it?” she pressed aggressively.

He exhaled heavily. “Curiosity.”

“What?” she said in tired incredulity. “It’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

“That is not entirely true,” he said, taking a seat on the ground and looking to her face.

She took his meaning and put her hand to her abdomen, nodding. She sat down on the ground and stared into the fire awhile, quietly chewing the inside of her cheek. “I almost got rid of it,” she said after several minutes of quiet. “I had the deathroot distillation right in my hand. I very nearly drank it.”

Solas took a sharp inhale, not so much at the content of her words as at the fact that she was sharing them with him. “Why didn’t you?”

She shrugged. “I was curious. I felt like it was a piece of this puzzle: the emerald graves, the anchor, the Vir’abelasan, Mythal, the ancient elves, our child. I thought it all fit together, I just wasn’t sure how.”

A warmth tingled in Solas’ chest when she said the word “our.”

She laughed. “It turns out I was right! It all connects to you. A trail of breadcrumbs Mythal used to guide me to you in Din’an Hanin.”

He frowned, unsure that even Mythal had the power to so completely orchestrate the events of
Ahrue’s life. “How exactly was your pregnancy a breadcrumb? If anything, I would expect it to be a deterrent from undertaking such a journey.”

Ahrue shivered despite the warmth of the cave. “I couldn’t stand another moment of humans worrying over me, whispering, and staring at my body, searching for signs of change. I couldn’t get out of Skyhold fast enough.”

“I can imagine. But why Din’an Hanin? Why not the Arbor Wilds?” While Mythal may have wanted Ahrue to meet him in the Graves, surely the trail that Ahrue believed she was following would have led her first to the Vir’abelasan.

She blushed slightly and looked down at her fidgeting hands. “That night between us in the Graves… That’s when this happened,” she said, briefly touching the swell of her belly before resuming her fidgeting. “There was something supernatural about that night. You felt it. I thought maybe it was connected to the Well, maybe even why Abelas let me drink.” She shook her head. “Just a feeling. It was stupid.”

A pang of nostalgia gripped his stomach at the mention of their night in the Emerald Graves, but he pushed it aside to focus on the content of her words. He considered Ahrue’s theory. Could there be a connection between the conception of their child and the Vir’abelasan? Why would a geas to Mythal… A panic buzzed through Solas body, tensing his every muscle, as a thought took shape. “She wants the child.” He should have put it together sooner.

Ahrue jumped. “What?”

“Mysthal. She wants to possess our child. Her own daughter refused her, so she’s decided to take ours!” Solas shook as the panic built to rage. “It would explain much.”

Ahrue shook her head. “No,” she said firmly. “She told Morrigan that a soul could not be imposed on someone. It had to be willingly accepted.”

“Unless the prospective vessel is passive and lacks reason! It is how Morrigan’s son was able to house Urthemiel. The soul was transferred to the child before he was born.”

Ahrue tensed but her voice remained steady. “If that is her plan then why didn’t she transfer herself when I met her months ago?”
“Most likely she still required her old body and mind. Within a fetus she would not have full command of her powers. She would not be able to control you through the geas without a fully developed mind. And, without full command of the geas, she would not be able to direct you to assist me in reaching the Sanctum. And she does want me to reach the sanctum.”

“Are you sure about this, Solas?”

“No. But it explains your feeling that your pregnancy is related to the Vir’abelasan. And it is in keeping with what I know of Mythal.” The years had changed his old friend, but she had always been willing to use unsavory means to reach a valued end. “She is highly invested in her survival. I believe this is not outside of the bounds of what she is capable of or willing to do to ensure her longevity.”

The tension in Ahrue’s body broke and her face went lax. “The geas… I won’t be able to stop her.”

Solas wanted to hold her, to promise her that he would not let Mythal possess their child. But, if he was being completely honest with himself, even without a geas directing his actions, Solas was not a match for Mythal. “I will do everything I can to prevent this from happening,” was the best comfort he could honestly offer her.

Ahrue slumped forward and brought her hand to her face to shield her eyes. Her body shook with silent sobs.

Solas wasn’t sure what gesture was called for. He desperately wanted to hold her, but feared she might reject the gesture. He was reminded of their night in the fade when he had come to her as the Wolf, comforted her through the night as they shared in the pain he had caused. Just as he had that night, he gathered his courage and went to her. She flinched when his hand made contact with her bare shoulder, but she didn’t pull away. “I wish I could do more,” he said softly, his own voice faltering with emotion that threatened to break. Ahrue lifted her head and turned to him, her face distorted in pain. And in a surprise gesture, she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. He remained frozen in shock for only a moment before he regained himself and pulled her closer in a stabilizing embrace. “I am here,” he whispered. “Whatever you need.”

Ahrue wailed at his words. “Solas, I have never felt so powerless. She takes every choice from me, and leaves me broken.”

“Not broken, vhenan,” he said, tightening his hold on her. “Whatever she does, you cannot be broken.”
Iron Bull returned to Skyhold from a short morning patrol as he’d planned. He dismounted his faithful nuggalope, Assaranda, just inside the gates, reached into his saddle bag, and pulled out a very small pouch, tied shut with a leather string. He bounced it lightly on his palm, grimacing internally at the unkindness he was about to do Assaranda. Bull turned the nuggalope’s head to face him. “I’m sorry for this, pal. I promise I’ll make it up to you later.” Bull loosened the string on the satchel and it came open in his hand, revealing the grey and black dust within. He positioned it between the naggalope’s face and his own and blew across his palm, sending the dust wafted in an ashy cloud into poor Assaranda’s trusting eyes. The dust hit and the nuggalope snorted and pinched his eyes shut. Then he thrashed his head as the burning set in. Soon he was rearing back and stomping heavily enough to shake the ground, and Bull had to strain against the reins to keep the beast from charging off.

Assaranda paid Bull back with a heavy head-butt in his side. Bull grunted at the cracking pain. “Yeah, I had that coming,” he said breathlessly. “I promise, it’s sugar cubes and clover for you for the next two weeks.” He put some muscle behind the reins and dragged the struggling nuggalope into the Skyhold courtyard and toward the stables.

When they neared the stables, a young giant-of-a-human glanced their way at the sound of the enraged nuggalope and Bull’s shouts of distress. Horace Keyes. The last name on Leliana’s list. The well-built kid was carrying crates from a supply wagon to the nearby merchants. He was almost as big as Bull, and his size and strength meant that his tasks in Skyhold mostly consisted of moving heavy things from place to place and fetching stuff from high shelves. Iron Bull had planned for his return to Skyhold to coincide with Horace’s work in the courtyard in order to stage a seemingly natural encounter.

“Hey, you!” Bull called out to him. Horace glanced around and behind him to verify if it was him the Qunari wanted. “Yeah you! Big guy! Gimme a hand with this!” Bull made a big show of struggling with his mount and played up the bruised ribs for added sympathy.

Horace quickly ran the crate in his arms to the waiting merchant before sprinting to Assaranda’s side and grabbing the reins. With both of their strength applied to the reins, they were able to get a firm control of the giant beast, who still stomped and thrashed at the pepper in his nose and eyes.

“Help me get him to the stables,” Bull said above the braying of his angry war nug. Horace nodded and they managed to slowly wrangle Assaranda into the stables.

“Maker! What got it so riled?” Horace asked as the nuggalope continued to pull against the reins with more strength than two horses.
“Damned wolf spooked him,” Bull lied. “I guess no one ever told poor Assaranda here that he could stomp a wolf into paste if he tried!”

Horace laughed. “Well, what now? He’s not going in his pen like this!”

Bull glanced around, pretending to look for a solution. He smiled broadly when he caught sight of a water trough nearby. “Can you handle him by yourself for a second?”

Horace’s eyes widened. “I don’t know, ser…” he said, muscles strained against the nuggalope’s pull as it was.

“Just for a second. Big kid like you, I know you can handle it,” Bull said with a wink.

Horace nodded uncertainly.

Bull ran to the trough and lifted it from the ground with a grunt, the contents sloshing down his bare chest. He walked heavily to face the distressed Assaranda and dumped the water in the trough over the nuggalope’s head, drenching Horace in the process. Assaranda snorted the water from his nose and its thrashing and stomping calmed some, now that the pepper was washed from its face.

Horace wiped the water from his eyes and looked at Bull in amazement. “How did you know that would work?”

Bull shrugged. “Nothing like a dunk in cold water to calm you down when your blood is pumping. Besides, nugs love a good bath.” He’d learned in his training with the Ben-Hassrath that the best kinds of lies were the ones that were true. “Now keep a hold of him while I take off the saddle.”

Horace nodded and stroked the nuggalope’s neck. Assaranda practically cooed under his soothing touch. Horace was gentle and helpful. It seemed unlikely that he was the person Leliana was looking for, but sometimes even gentle people could do shitty things with the right motivation. Bull’s intuition said this wasn’t their guy, but he decided to let things play out.

“What’s your name, kid?” Bull asked while unfastening the girth of the saddle.
“Horace, ser. And you’re the Iron Bull, right? You helped kill Corypheus!” The kid’s eyes were big as saucers.

Bull chuckled. “I wasn’t there for the actual killing part, but yeah, I helped out here and there.”

“So you know the Inquisitor, then? The old Inquisitor, I mean. Lavellan.”

“Sure I know her!” said Bull, pulling the saddle off of Assaranda and tossing it onto a nearby railing. “We’re good friends. Been through a lot together.” He whistled. “The stories I could tell you!”

Horace’s face brightened with an excited grin, making him look even younger than he was. “I’d love to hear stories! I only ever saw her a few times. I got here just a few days before she left.”

Bull frowned and rubbed the back of his neck as he began guiding the nuggalope to his stall. “Yeah, she had some stuff to take care of, I guess.”

Horace walked with him, continuing to pet Assaranda’s neck. “Do you know if the rumors are true?”

“Kid, there are more rumors going around about the Inquisitor than I have scars.” He threw open the stall door and patted the nuggalope’s haunches to urge him in.

Horace came in close and lowered his voice to a whisper. “I heard she’s in a family way, but her husband was killed in the battle with Corypheus. Skyhold made her too sad because everywhere she looked she’d remember their time together and how much she missed him, so she left to return to her clan in the north.”

Ah, the political version of the story. Bull suspected this particular rumor had been started strategically by the Red and Josephine to manage the scandal and protect reputations. The gossip ran the gamut from every possible romantic pairing with Lavellan to Immaculate Conception. Just after Ahrue left, the blacksmith had spat on Bull, saying, “You Qunari have about as much honor as a rabid rat. How could you let her go like that? Don’t family mean nothing to you?” Yes, every variation of this story had been told, and everyone had their favorite. Horace looked sincere as he spoke, and Bull’s sense that he was not the spy deepened.
“It’s not far off,” said Bull, latching the stall once Assaranda was inside. “Except Solas didn’t die and Ahrue’s not going back to her clan.” He didn’t correct Horace on the point of Solas being Ahrue’s husband, because, honestly, he didn’t see the relevant distinction. Marriage sounded like a bunch of Chantry mumbo-jumbo to him that had more to do with property rights and religion than actual feeling.

The boy’s face lit up. “Do you think they ran away together?”

Iron Bull laughed. This gentle giant was a romantic. “Nah, Solas was gone well before the Boss left.”

He wasn’t deterred. “Well, he might have gone ahead to get a job or build a house!” His chest puffed up as he said it.

Bull picked up on Horace’s personal investment in this story. He wanted either a tragedy or a happily-ever-after, both terribly romantic in their own way. “You got special someone back home, Horace?” he asked, knowing the answer would be yes.

Horace grinned and blushed. “I do. His name is Ned. He’s a sculptor in a little town called Norfolk in Ferelden.” Horace kicked at the dirt. “Well, he should be a sculptor, but there’s no place for artists in Norfolk. So he raises pigs. I’m trying to make enough money so we can get married and move to Val Royeaux. There he can get a job as an artist to the Imperial Court.”

Definitely a romantic. Bull smiled and reached into his saddlebag, pulling out a pouch of coin. He tossed it to Horace. “Maybe that will get you a little closer. Thanks for the help with my nuggalope, kid.” Bull turned and walked away as Horace stammered thank you repeatedly after him.

The boy didn’t have an insincere bone in his body. If he was a spy, he would have been sweating bullets just being near a member of the inner circle, let alone talking about Lavellan. Trouble was, Horace was the last name on Red’s list. None of the suspects were Venatori agents. He’d spent a week going through each name, finding out what he could about them, watching them, talking to them, and each suspect was as implausible as the last. Either Bull’s Ben-Hassrath training was woefully out of practice, or Leliana had missed something.

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Leliana heard Bull’s heavy footsteps long before he topped the stairs of the rookery. Her heart lifted, certain that he would have answers for her. But when his great horned head came into view, Bull just shrugged. Leliana flared her nostrils. Dead end after dead end. She needed answers.

Bull signaled for her to follow him outside. They walked out the door leading to the lower level of the battlements. Leliana sat on the stone ledge and Bull handed her the list of suspects she’d given him a week before, now with all five names crossed out. “You are sure?” she asked.

He leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. “Yup. I’m a more likely suspect than any of these folks. You sure there aren’t any other names that belong on this list?”

Leliana sighed. “I’m sure there are dozens more that belong on that list. These were the most likely.”

“How about second most likely?”

Leliana began pacing. “It could be someone from the settlement outside. They come and go freely. Or one of the mages. I thought a servant would have the least conspicuous access to Lavellan. Someone who wouldn’t be noticed if they stood close while important matters were being discussed.”

Iron Bull frowned. “Maybe someone trusted? Someone who wouldn’t need to depend on being unseen to get close.”

Leliana did not want to think of that possibility. Besides Solas, she trusted every member of the Inquisition’s inner circle without reservation. Even Blackwall had proven he was not the traitor he’d once been. And none of them had any ties to the Venatori. Well… except one. “Dorian?” she said resignedly.

“What?” Bull’s arms fell to his side. “Not a chance.”

Leliana shook her head. Bull knew him best but was also the most likely to be biased in Dorian’s favor. “Then who? Sera? Cassandra? Who among us do you think capable of betraying Lavellan?”
“No, none of them. None of the Inner Circle. But maybe someone close to us? One of Sera’s friends or Varric’s Bianca—who doesn’t exactly have a good track record in the ‘trustworthy’ department, if you remember…”

“Or one of the Chargers?” Leliana added.

Bull’s eye narrowed. “Easy now! My guys are good,” he said firmly.

“Are you so sure?” Leliana knew Bull was feeling defensive. First she’d brought up Dorian and now she was going after his team. Bull was protective of the people he loved, which only increased her sense of how important it was to push him on this. She knew firsthand how disastrous it could be when love blinded a person to the traitors in their midst. “Your Chargers are composed of murderers, outlaws, and outcasts. Do you know them all so well that you can be certain none of them…”

Bull leaned in close and lowered his voice. “My guys are good,” he repeated slowly.

Leliana caught the warning in his tone. She would drop it… for now.

Bull moved to leave. “Come up with another list,” he said in a casual tone, telling her that all was forgiven if she let her suspicion of the Chargers drop. “I’ll keep checking people out. We’ll find them, Red.”
Ahrue woke to the warm sun shining harshly through her eyelids. She sighed and folded her arms over her face, wishing she could sink into the ground beneath her to avoid another day of being driven helplessly toward her fate. A heavy stiffness had been building in her chest for the past week. What Solas had said about Mythal had settled in gradually. And Ahrue’s awareness that there was absolutely nothing she could do to prevent Mythal’s continued use of her made her recoil from any strong feelings on the matter besides a quiet dread of the inevitable. Anger seemed pointless in light of her complete lack of power, so she decided not to feel it, and settled into a numb resignation. What little affection had begun to stir in her heart for the life growing within her was snuffed out too. It was a vessel for Mythal, and she the unwilling host. She would carry it as Mythal willed, she would birth it as Mythal willed, and she would foster it as Mythal willed. But the child was not Ahrue’s, nor had it been since the moment she drank from the Well of Sorrows. The ‘choice’ she’d made to keep the child was not a real choice at all; if she’d been determined to rid her body of it, Mythal would have interceded as she had on the steps of Din’an Hanin and when she’d taken Kieran in the fade.

Mythal kept Ahrue on a long leash, usually granting her some slack, but was willing to pull with abrupt and choking firmness if she strayed too far from the path. And with every tug of her chain, with every fluttering motion of the child within her, Despair clawed at Ahrue’s heart, shredding her hope to ribbons. Despite her victory over the demon in the fade, Despair stayed with her, positively purring at the deepening of her pain. Several times each day she considered letting the demon take her, imagined the release it had offered her in the guise of Cole. At least the pain would end. But then she’d consider the damage a demon could do were it to possess her. An abomination with her power and control of the anchor? She shuddered at the thought.

She was powerless. The best Ahrue could hope for was that her womb would expel the fetus too soon for it to live. Such things were not uncommon with the women in her family. Her own mother had lost a baby in her six month of pregnancy when Ahrue was six years old. What had been a tragedy when it had happened to her mother would be a relief were the same to occur for Ahrue. Losing the child would allow her to regain control of her body. Further, if the aged Mythal could not secure another willing host, Ahrue would be free from the geas once the witch finally succumbed to old age.

While the suffocating weight of the geas and the prospect of Mythal possessing their child made Ahrue’s blood run cold, Solas seethed. In the time Ahrue had known him, she could count the number of times she’d seen him truly angry on one hand. Now it seemed that rage was his constant companion. His words to her were still kind and cautiously affectionate, but she could see the fury flashing behind his eyes, stiffening his muscles, and tightening his voice. She wondered how much of that anger was meant for Mythal and how much of it was meant for her. He’d been furious with her when she’d first drank from the Well, and now the consequences of her mistake had revisited her with staggering force. She wasn’t sure if Solas’ anger concerning Mythal and the Vir’abelasan was on Ahrue’s behalf, or if he had some personal stake in her predicament, if he felt invested in the life and freedom of Ahrue and the child as something beyond a debt he owed her.
Solas had said nothing of what his plans were for after he restored the seal of the sanctum. He’d made no suggestion that he intended to move on afterward, nor had he indicated that he hoped to remain with her. Of course voicing such hopes would have been highly presumptuous given the state of things between them. Even if he wished to repair things between them, he was certainly aware that a declaration of long term intentions would not be welcomed by Ahrue. The love was not gone, and her anger had softened somewhat in the two weeks since he’d told her the truth of himself. But he was still the man who lied to her, the man who used her, the man who left her. Beyond the grief he had caused—and continued to cause—her personally, she had trouble seeing past the devastating effects of his actions on the world. Intended of not, he had been the cause of much death and suffering. What was worse, he had slept while the world shuddered under the impact of his deeds. Just as he had abandoned her to the fallout of their relationship, he had abandoned the world to cope with the wars and blights that had resulted from his choice to seal away the Creators and the Forgotten Ones.

Until recently. For whatever reason, he had decided to deal with Corypheus and the weakening seal personally. But Ahrue suspected that after this was over, after the seal was restored and Solas felt satisfied that he’d done his best to help her, he would return to sleep, perhaps forever. And as the sun continued to beat down on her face with its relentless heraldry of the new day, Ahrue understood the appeal.

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Solas crouched on the ground picking some wild hodgeberries and gathering them into his tin cup. He knew they were a favorite of Ahrue, though he personally found the tiny red berries to be aggressively tart. Still, if it meant seeing Ahrue smile, he would gladly eat hodgeberries until his teeth were stained red and his tongue was numb. She’d grown increasingly despondent over the course of their two weeks together. Her usual vibrancy had all but left her eyes, and Solas was gripped by the feeling that she was fading away in front of him. His fault.

When he returned to camp carrying a mug full of the hodgeberries, Ahrue was still lying on her bedroll, her arms folded over her face. She sighed at the sound of his approach but said nothing. Solas frowned. She’d been much slower to rise in the morning lately.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked as he leaned his staff up against a tree, knowing the answer already. Not only had she tossed and turned for most of the night, when she had slept, he’d felt the disruption of her unsettling dreams.

“Yes, I slept fine,” she lied, as she had every morning he’d asked for the past few days. She was
surely aware he knew better, so Solas took her answer as a request to not ask any follow up questions, which he grudgingly respected. She peaked one eye out from the cover of her arms. “How about you?”

Solas tensed his jaw, wishing he had good news for her. He’d been searching the fade for Mythal for a week, and still could not find her. Only in dreams did he stand any chance of defeating Mythal, but his considerable power was useless if he could not connect to her dreaming mind. “It was an unproductive night,” he said, his voice tensed against the anger that boiled any time Mythal crossed his thoughts.

Ahrue propped herself up on one elbow and looked at him, with an unmoved expression. “There’s always tonight,” she said, as she did every morning he’d reported on his failure to reach Mythal. The words gave the illusion of hopefulness, but Solas knew she had no faith that he would succeed. She fully expected Mythal to take the child and force Ahrue to spend the rest of her life as a slave to the witch’s whims. Even if they attempted to stall until the baby was born and thus no longer subject to possession by Mythal, the geas made it impossible for Ahrue to hide from her. Even if they found a way to prevent her from being summoned to Mythal’s side, Mythal could seek Ahrue out personally.

Solas wanted to comfort her, but he could think of nothing to counter the hopelessness that had enveloped her. He sat on the ground, facing her. “We have some time. Flemeth will not relish being in a state of helplessness; she will wait until she has no choice.”

Ahrue blinked slowly, and traced her finger through the dirt between them. “She will not be able to command me once she’s taken possession of the fetus?”

Solas caught the direction of her thought. “I doubt she will be able to command you directly, but I suspect you will still be prohibited from acting against her as a standing condition of the geas.”

She looked up at him through dark lashes. “But you could.”

He would. To free Ahrue from the geas, he would willingly destroy Mythal when she was at her most vulnerable. But surely Mythal would plan against such eventualities. Or would she make the same mistake as her sleeping kin and assume his loyalty would protect her from his wrath? He would prefer not to kill Mythal, but it posed a tempting solution: it would free Ahrue from the geas and it would give Solas a powerful soul to sacrifice in the restoration of the barrier, freeing him from his obligation to sacrifice himself. But the cost. “You would ask me to kill our child?” he said, as gently as he could, wanting to be sure this was what she wanted.
Ahue sat up and put a hand to her abdomen, refusing to make eye contact with Solas. “It’s not ours,” she said in a low voice. “It has belonged to Mythal since the moment I drank from the Well.” Her hand dropped to her side. “It is one more shackle. I would be rid of it now if I could.”

He heard it in her voice: the self-blame, the shame, the desperation, the defeat. He reached out for her hand. She didn’t pull away, but her hand was limp in his grasp and her gaze remained impassive. “If that is what you wish, there are herbs that will induce contractions.” His throat tightened against the words, knowing despite his own feelings, that the choice should be hers, not his, and certainly not Mythal’s. “I can brew and administer the potion.”

Ahrue lifted her eyes and her lips quivered slightly. “You would do that for me?” Her fingers tightened around his hand, and the warmth of her touch spread tingling up his arm.

He leaned forward and smiled weakly. “Of course. There is very little I wouldn’t do for you.” He reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of his free hand. “The choice is entirely yours, but consider this: we may yet have time to find an alternative solution, and if you pass the child now, it will do nothing to free you from the geas. Mythal may find another host to command, and you would still be subject to her will.”

She sighed. “You want me to wait? Let this play out?”

What he wanted was time to find another solution. He did not wish to be faced with the task of ending the life of his child and his oldest friend in one deadly strike. The fetus, as of yet, had no connection to the fade, had no spirit or will that made it more than a… possibility. The longer they waited, the more real it would become, and the harder it would be to destroy it, even if Mythal would have already done the work of snuffing out its soul to make room for her own. He swallowed back the emotions that strained in his throat. “I think waiting will be immeasurably difficult but would ultimately reap the greatest possible benefits. Either as a way to effectively end the geas or as… more.”

She squeezed his hand very tightly and looked into his eyes with an intensity that thrilled and unnerved him. “Solas, promise me…”

Ahrue was cut off by the sound of a breaking branch to the east and the crinkle of leaves under heavy boots. Ahrue reached for her sword hilt and staff that rested on the far side of her bedroll. “Company,” she breathed. Solas stood up and grabbed his own staff from where it was leaning against a tree on the edge of camp. He could sense the fade fluctuating a few paces from where the sound of the breaking branch had originated. His eyes flitted to Ahrue, who nodded in the direction of what he had sensed. She felt it too. He summoned a barrier around her. And once she rose to her feet, she returned the favor with a swirl of her staff. His heart faltered with the sinking awareness that she wasn’t wearing armor.
Ahrue stood at the ready and Solas could feel the power singing through her as she gathered herself for the impending battle. He was reminded of the first time he’d seen her in combat, the first time he’d sensed her unique power and felt the way she seemed to brighten and intensify the space around her, the first time his blood quickened at her effortless manipulation of mana. The day he felt the world change.

Another crinkle of leaves sounded, and Ahrue slammed her staff to the ground. A bolt of light flashed from the foliage where her spell connected, and a strangled cry sounded, just before two Red Templars came charging toward her. Solas’ grip tightened around his staff. Without lifting his it from the ground, he moved the rod in a stirring motion while focusing on the ground between Ahrue and the charging Templars. The place where his gaze was fixed began to distort and swirl in a vortex of power, in unison with the motion of his staff. The Templars who stepped there lost their footing as they were pulled toward the center of the distortion. Ahrue used her spectral blade to effortlessly deflect a bolt of energy that the mage still out of sight in the foliage sent her way. Meanwhile Solas moved his hand in a circular motion, gathering the air above the stumbling Templars’ heads into a dense globe. He closed his hand into a fist, feeling the globe tighten further, and brought his arm down sharply. The globe responded in kind, smashing with great force onto the heads of the Templars, just as the vortex began to let up, sending them to the ground.

Ahrue, who had dispatched the mage while Solas was keeping the Templars busy, stepped swiftly to where they struggled on the ground, slowly trying to get to their feet and shake the ringing from their heads. With a blast of force emanating from her outstretched hand, one of the Templar’s flipped to his back, and Ahrue thrust her blade through the eye slit of his helmet, ending him in a spurt of blood.

The second Templar had the presence of mind to hook his axe around Ahrue’s ankles and sweep her feet out from under her. She landed heavily on her tailbone and lost her grip on her staff. Solas’ held his breath as anger fed the power that rushed through his hands in a blast of fire directed at the Templar’s head. The Templar shouted out and shielded his eye slit from the flame, but continued to clamber to his feet.

At that moment, Dirtharavas came barreling from the forest in a streak of silvery white, head down, and horns aimed for the Templar. She collided with the Templar’s chest, sending him back to the ground, and his axe skidding out of his reach. Dirth reared onto her back legs and landed heavily on his head. He moaned, moving his limbs aimlessly. Dirth reared back a second time and brought her full weight onto the man’s chest, denting his armor. When Dirth’s hooves landed for a third strike, the Templar went still and quiet.

Solas looked at Dirth in stunned silence for a moment before he heard Ahrue grunt as she pushed herself off the ground and into a standing position. She pressed a hand to her tailbone and grimaced.
“Are you injured?” he asked, his voice still charged with adrenalin.

“Just bruised, I think,” she said with another grunt. “You alright?”

“I am fine.” He smiled at her. “Your condition does not seem to impair your ability to fight. You are impressive as ever.”

She laughed wryly. “I sure don’t feel impressive. I wouldn’t have made it through without you and Dirth.” She smiled. “I may be sleeping in armor from now on.”

Solas barely had time to notice the odd warping of the space behind Ahrue’s right shoulder before the cloaked figure emerged as if from nowhere. The dagger came out before the shout left Solas’ throat. Ahrue had barely begun to turn when the rogue planted the blade just shy of her neck and pulled it out again in a swift crimson arc. Ahrue’s hilt was still in her hand, and she thrust it backward, pressing the hilt to the stomach of her attacker, and materialized the blade. The rogue made a choked gurgling noise. Ahrue stumbled forward to her knees, releasing her sword, the hilt clattering to the ground as the blade dematerialized.

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Ahrue felt a warm dampness spreading outward from the searing pain between her neck and shoulder. Behind her she heard the rogue fall to the ground, gurgling. “Fuck that hurt!” she said, her voice tensed against the agony that threatened to make her lose consciousness. “Definitely sleeping in armor from now on,” she murmured as Solas ran up and crouched behind her.

She felt his fingers shaking as he gently touched the blood drenched fabric surrounding the injury, as they always had when he explored the damage she’d taken in combat. The familiarity of the gesture was an odd comfort, as she breathed into the soothing coolness of his healing touch. She had just begun to feel her flesh start to knit together, when Solas abruptly broke contact. As he pulled away, the injury seemed to blaze, the pain spindling out from the wound. “Fenedhis, Solas! Why did you do that?”

He said nothing.

His silence made her chest tighten. “Solas? What’s wrong?”
“Remove your tunic, please,” he said, in a braced tone.

Her heart sped up and her head began to swim with a mixture of pain and worry as she undid the buttons on her shirt, moving her right arm as little as possible. When the buttons were undone, Solas gingerly grasped the fabric and pulled it gently free from the wound and off her back and shoulders. She gasped as the air made contact with the injury in a stinging jolt.

Solas breath quickened and then stopped.

“What is it?” she asked, unable to conceal the panic in her voice. “Talk to me!”

His voice came out wavering and soft. “I… uh… I need…” He stood up, backed away from her, and began stumbling toward where the rogue had fallen. She could hear the rustling of fabric as he searched the rogue’s body.

“Solas! If it’s poultices you need, I have some in my pack!”

“Just… just a moment,” he said weakly. She heard him walking around again, moving quickly into the woods.

He was panicking, acting irrationally. And Ahrue would bleed to death while he wandered in a daze around the forest. She looked to her pack and tried to blink away the cloudiness obstructing her vision. It was just a few feet away. She could get the poultice herself. She leaned forward, distributing her weight between her left hand, and each leg, while keeping her right arm hugged to her side. She began to crawl toward her pack, teeth gritted against the burning pain that now stretched halfway down her back and over her shoulder. Her limbs shook as she dragged herself forward, pain growing with each breath.

The pack was just out of her reach, when she heard the crunching leaves under footfalls heading her way. She sighed in relief as Solas came running back toward her and crouched in front of her, breathless and very pale. He held a circular disk in front of her face with a trembling hand. “Wha… what is that?” she asked, finding that her speech was slurring slightly.

“A rune of stasis. The mage had it.”
Ahrue wasn’t sure if Solas wasn’t making sense or if the pain was numbing her thinking. “I don’t…”

“The wound is tainted with poison or dark magic…” Ahrue’s arm gave out and she started to fall forward. Solas caught her and held her upright. With his face close to hers, she could hear the irregularity of his breath. “It is spreading… and I don’t know how to heal it.” He pressed the rune to her chest. “This may save you until I can find help.”

Ahrue could barely process his words, let alone respond. Everything was getting very cold and hazy. She had a vague sense that he was stroking her hair, and she thought she heard him say “Ar lath ma, Vhenan” in a choked voice just before everything froze.

-x-

As the rune took effect, Ahrue’s went completely slack, slumping forward into Solas’ arms. His heart racing at her sudden stillness, Solas turned her so she was face up, head resting against his thigh. The sight of her made him gasp. Her skin was ashen and her face completely vacant, with open, glazed eyes. She had no breath, and a quick, trembling touch to her throat confirmed there was no pulse either. Seeing her like this, feeling her dead, limp weight, Solas lost what little composure he’d managed to maintain so far. He held her to him, and rocked forward and backward, weeping into her hair, soundlessly mouthing her name over and over. Lysias had said that the runes of stasis were supposed to maintain her life in a state of near death. But Ahrue did not look near death. She looked dead, she felt dead. Solas could barely breathe through his terror at the possibility that the rune may not have worked, the possibility that Ahrue was gone from the world and his life. “Please, live, Vhenan,” he whispered, lips pressed against her cold cheek.

Solas jumped at the low bellow beside him, as Dirtharavas took in the sight of Ahrue. The halla lowered her head to snuffle her mistress’ still form. Solas felt the impulse to snatch Ahrue from the beast’s intrusion and claim this moment for himself alone, but he recalled his beloved’s fondness for the halla and permitted its presence for her sake. Dirth nosed against her forehead, tilting Ahrue’s head backward and forcing Solas to look again at her slack, vacant expression. Her empty wide eyes made Solas’ stomach churn against the overwhelming impression that she was dead. A choked sob left his lips, echoed by the bray of the mourning halla, as Solas brushed his hand against Ahrue’s lashes to close her eyes.

He suddenly felt the desperate need to get away from her, to not feel her cold skin against his. He nearly threw her from him but was halted by a conflicting need to treat her with care and tenderness. Solas repositioned himself to get some leverage and pushed off the ground, lifting Ahrue with him. He tried to ignore the way her limbs and neck swung loosely with each step as he carried her to her bedroll. He laid her down gently, and backed away quickly, gasping for breath, needing some space to clear his mind of the panicked grief that clouded his thoughts. Free of Ahrue’s lifeless touch, his pulse began to slow. He leaned forward, bracing his arms against his thighs as another deep sob wracked his body. She could not be dead, he tried to convince himself against the judgment of his senses. The rune was designed for exactly this: a Venatori or Templar
was to bring Ahrue to the cusp of death and use this rune to maintain her life for transport. They would not have risked losing the power of the anchor by attacking her if they weren’t sure that the rune would work. Solas repeated this bit of rationale to himself several times while taking deep breaths in an attempt to restore his calm. Ahrue was not dead; she was in stasis. Ahrue was not dead; she was in stasis.

Solas gathered himself and walked back to her. He should check the wound to be sure the rune had at least prevented the poison or dark magic from continuing to spread. He knelt next to her and gently rolled her to her side. He grabbed the nearby water skin and poured the lukewarm liquid over the wound, clearing away the blood that was smeared down her back. While the cut was deep, it no longer bled, and the black spindling tendrils just under the skin that branched from the wound, down and across her back and over her shoulder, had stopped spreading. At least there was that.

He released a slow shaking exhale, unsure of what to do next. They should leave the camp site; if this group of Venatori did not report back, others may come looking for them, and Solas was quite sure he could not handle a group of Templars and Venatori by himself. The Venatori could be doing routine sweeps of the region in search of Ahrue. And Solas needed to get Ahrue to a true healer, someone who had the skills to handle whatever foul venom had entered her blood. Most large cities would have an adept herbalist and spirit healer who would be able to tend to the problem. They were perhaps a three-day journey from Halamshiral, but more Venatori would undoubtedly be waiting for them in or near the city. He could not risk taking her there, not while she was incapacitated. Lydes was perhaps a four day walk from where they were, but it carried the same risk. He could think of nowhere to go for help that wouldn’t put them in danger of being intercepted by Venatori forces. Even Skyhold seemed to have been infiltrated by Venatori agents.

Solas set about packing up the campsite. He could think of only one place where they would be safe from the Venatori: Enansal’nan. He could bring Ahrue there and then set out to find help while the spirits of the place protected her from harm. The thought of leaving her there filled him with panic. What if the rune stopped working while he was away? She would wake and die frightened and alone. Or what if he was killed on his way to get help? Ahrue could conceivably stay frozen on this cusp of death forever, lost to the world because he’d failed her. But despite these worries, Enansal’nan was their best chance. If he could get her there.

Solas secured Ahrue’s tent and bedroll to Dirtharavas’ saddle bags. The halla still brayed in grief, unable to understand the magic that kept Ahrue a hair’s breadth from death. He stroked the hart’s neck to soothe her, and the halla responded by nuzzling against his neck, perhaps recognizing that Solas too was distraught over Ahrue’s state. “It will be alright,” he said gently, more to himself than to the halla.

Solas gathered his own equipment from around the campsite. His breath caught as he bent to pick up the forgotten tin cup filled to the brim with hodgeberries. He hadn’t gotten to share them with Ahrue. And now he might never get to see her face brighten as she used her tongue to press one of the berries to the roof of her mouth, making it pop in a tart burst of bright red juice. He looked at
her lying still as death, and again fought the impression her ashen skin and slack face left on his senses. He returned his gaze to the little red berries in the mug and took one between a thumb and forefinger. He put it in his mouth and pressed the berry to the roof of his mouth, just as he had seen Ahrue do, until the sour juice rushed abruptly from the ruptured skin of the fruit. He dumped the rest of the berries onto the ground before throwing his mug into his pack.

He left behind his own tent, bedroll, and spare clothes, to lighten the load for Dirth. He discarded Ahrue’s spare clothes as well, and all duplicate or non-vital equipment between them. He found an odd bundle in the bottom of her bag, and pulled it out to find the shattered pieces of his orb wrapped in a satin scarf. Solas gasped softly as his fingers played along the swirls carved into the broken pieces. Why had she kept this? He pushed the question aside and returned the pieces to their place in her pack. He managed to consolidate their equipment enough that he could leave his pack behind, putting all their necessary gear into Ahrue’s pack, which he secured to Dirth.

The lifeless form of the rogue who had attacked Ahrue caught his eye. She lay in a pool of blood at the far end of camp, the vile dagger beside her. His blood surged looking at the person who had darkened his world. He wished she had suffered more. Solas picked up the dagger and fastened it to his belt.

Solas dressed Ahrue in her armor and cloak and draped her over the back of the halla before mounting the hart himself. Once secured in the saddle, he positioned Ahrue in front of him, leaning her sideways against his chest and holding her in place with one arm. He tapped Dirtharavas’ sides gently to urge her along, and they set out in a northwesterly direction for the hidden sanctuary of Enansal’nan.
Leliana leaned back in the chair in front of Cullen’s desk, while Josephine paced the room reading the disappointingly few responses to the Inquisitions’ inquiries about Halviana and the Venatori they’d received from their contacts in Tevinter. Most contacts had not responded, and from the tone of the three responses they had received, Leliana suspected that they could not rely on much assistance or support from anyone in the Imperium, although she was still holding out hope that Dorian would be in touch. Besides Dorian, their most likely and potentially helpful ally was Magister Maevaris Tilani. She had no love for the Venatori, and the Inquisition had leant her their support when the Venatori had tried to eliminate her several months before. But even her response, while amicable, echoed the hesitant sentiment of the other missives.

Josephine read Tilani’s letter out loud:

*My Lord Inquisitor (it is “Lord” now, isn’t it?),*

*You could not have picked a worse target in the Imperium, save the Archon himself. Halviana is not only a powerful member of the Imperial Senate, she has a brother, an aunt, a step-mother, and two distant cousins currently serving as well. She is well liked, well connected, and very well protected.*

*Unfortunately, now that your former Inquisitor has so nicely done away with the threat posed by Corypheus, any attack on Halviana, political or martial, will most likely be taken as a desperate maneuver on the part of the Inquisition to maintain relevance. While it is well known that the Venatori still operate in Tevinter, without the monstrosity that was Corypheus standing at the head of them, they have simply become another of the many tolerated political factions vying for power in Tevinter. And I’m afraid that telling the Senate that the Venatori are going after the former Inquisitor won’t so much as raise an eyebrow among my fellows.*

*If you want me to create more ripples in the Senate on your behalf, I’ll need information that will make it clear to the Archon that the Venatori pose a real and current danger to Tevinter. Being a thorn in the side of a Southern power (one that many still consider a threat) will gain the Venatori and Halviana more supporters than it will cost them.*

*Apologies and best wishes,*

*Magister Maevaris Tilani*

“That’s it?” Cullen said, lip curled in disgust and incredulity. “After all we did for her in Qurinis?”

Leliana drummed her fingertips together. “Disappointing, but she is right. If we wish to disrupt Halviana’s power, Tevinter will need to feel personally invested before they’ll take action.”
Josephine sighed. “I understand their caution, but I had hoped that our friendship would mean more to them. Lavellan had made such strides toward a lasting peace.”

Leliana suspected that Ahrue’s departure may have signaled the instability of the Inquisition to allies and adversaries alike, costing them much in terms of political sway. Josephine was no doubt thinking the same. With a decreased military force, a new Inquisitor, and the lack of a galvanizing threat, their friendship as well as their enmity carried less weight than it used to.

Cullen’s jaw tightened. “We’ve failed her, then,” he said, pounding his fist into his desk, causing Josephine to jump. “We have no means to take down Halviana or stop the Venatori, no allies to support our efforts in the Imperium, and no leads on the spy in our own walls!” His nostrils twitched and his voice fell. “Ahrue could very well be dead or in Venatori hands, as we speak.”

The three were silent for a while. They had not heard from Ahrue since her brief message from Chalumeau, and their unspoken worries for her wellbeing and safety mounted daily. Cullen in particular was showing the strain, the stubble on his jaw pronounced, his eyes red and darkly circled, and his curls far less kempt than usual. He’d spent the past few weeks directing Inquisition forces in sweeps of the Dales. They’d had some success. The Venatori forces in Chalumeau were wiped out, and two Venatori squads had been eliminated just outside Halamshiral and a third on the road to Lydes. But the interrogation of captured Venatori agents had yielded nothing new, and there was no sign of Ahrue or Solas.

“Your efforts have made the Dales safer, Inquisitor,” Josephine said softly. “Lavellan may simply be lying low in an attempt to avoid the Venatori who have undoubtedly established a presence in all the major cities near the Dales. We cannot assume anything from her silence. She has simply lacked the means to contact us. The continued Venatori presence in the Dales is, in fact, evidence that they have not yet taken her. If they had her already, they would have no reason to maintain their watch.”

Leliana cringed inwardly at the words “yet” and “already.” Even Josie’s optimism was fading.

Cullen shook his head. “I tell myself that every day. But the fact remains that she is one person against an army specialized in hunting her down. They found her in the Graves and in Chalumeau. And their movements suggest that they anticipate her arrival in Halamshiral. Either their information concerning her destination exceeds even our own or...” he trailed off.

Leliana raised her eyebrows. “Or what?”

Cullen absentmindedly stroked the lid of a small wooden box he kept on his desk, frowning.
“Mage blood. It retains a magical link to the person to whom it once belonged.”

Phylacteries. Morrigan had told Leliana all about how those little vials of blood were used to keep Circle mages on a short leash, a fact that both chilled and angered her. As a former Templar, Cullen had likely used phylacteries on numerous occasions to hunt down apostates. “You think the Venatori are using a phylactery to track Lavellan.” Leliana said.

He shrugged. “A Templar or mage would require only a few drops of fresh blood and some lyrium to construct a functioning phylactery. It’s not a precise means of locating someone, but…”

“Paired with the intelligence supplied by the spy in our midst, they could greatly narrow their search,” Leliana finished.

Cullen nodded.

“But how would they obtain Lavellan’s blood?” Josephine asked, wide eyed.

“She has been injured by Venatori before, has she not?” Leliana responded darkly. “A carefully cleaned blade may have given them all the blood they required.”

Josephine bit her lip and Cullen ran his fingers through his disheveled curls. The tension and worry was thick in the room, but a sharp knock on the door served as a welcome interruption in the grim turn they had taken.

“Come,” Cullen called, his tone betraying his tension and exhaustion.

Agent Ritts came in bearing two scrolls. “Word from our troops, Ser,” she said, handing one message to Cullen. “And another from Tevinter,” she said, handing the second message to Leliana.

“Thank you. You may go,” Leliana said blandly as she broke the seal on the message. “Ah!” she exclaimed brightly, sitting up straighter in her chair. “It’s from Dorian!” She read his letter out loud to the others who focused on her in rapt attention. They were all desperate for some good news.

_Dear Leliana_,
I suppose it was too much to hope that the Venatori would just lie down and die once the mess with Corypheus was dealt with. They're not very gracious losers, it would seem. Pity.

Dorian went on to corroborate much of what Tilani had said regarding the challenge of deposing Halviana given her popularity and connections as well as the general disinterest of the Senate concerning the continued Venatori movement.

All of that said, there may be ways to sway opinions regarding Halviana and the Venatori by uncovering (or inventing) and spreading some scandal and seeding distrust. And for that you have come to the right man. Seeing as I have resumed my role as Minrathous’ most strapping pariah, I find myself with a rather idyllic view of the Imperium’s seedy underbelly. Since I arrived, I have had the pleasure of cavorting with thieves, outlaws, and killers, not to mention a plethora of disgruntled servants and slaves, many of whom are entirely willing to talk a man’s ear off about the most intriguing gossip if properly libated. I’ll see what I can do about using my new-found connections to stir up some trouble for Halviana. For Ahrue’s sake, I’ll even approach my father—Maker save me. I doubt he would agree to speak publically against Halviana at this time, but he may be aware of some chinks in her armor, so to speak. I’ll be in touch.

For your part, maybe try to ferret out those spies? Just a thought. If you can convince enough of Thedas that The Imperium has placed spies and assassins in their midst, a joint threat of retaliation from the South and East might just make the Archon squirm a little. That would put him in a more amenable position should you request that he depose Halviana and take action against the Venatori.

--Dorian

Leliana smiled weakly. “It’s not much, but it’s more than we had. We can work with this. If Dorian can gather enough gossip, we could arm Magister Tilani and perhaps Magister Pavus with a case against Halviana and the Venatori.”

Josephine nodded. “Gaining support from allies in Orlais, Ferelden, and the Free Marches will strengthen our position, but we will need more information about the spy network before I approach them. Otherwise, our allegations will appear to be little more than fear mongering.”

Leliana felt the pressure of her words. “Bull and I narrow our list of suspects every day. And I have contacts in numerous noble houses, military, and religious instillations across Thedas, watching the servants for suspect behavior. Something will come of it soon.” Perhaps some carefully laid traps would speed things along.

Josephine looked down at her notes. “In the meantime, perhaps we should bolster our forces in Halamshiral to meet Lavellan, as well as any opposition she may encounter, upon her arrival. Wouldn’t you say commander?”
Josephine and Leliana each turned to Cullen, who was staring silently at the open report Ritts had brought him. He’d gone very pale. Leliana tensed at the sight of him. “Cullen. What is it?”

He swallowed hard and kept his eyes fixed on the paper in his hands. “A report… from the field,” he said in an unsteady voice. “They found what looks like an abandoned camp site three days south of Halamshiral. Clothing and camping equipment tossed around. Four dead—apparently Venatori and Red Templars—likely killed within the past two days. Evidence of… a fifth person mortally wounded… A discarded tunic, soaked with blood, a cut in the fabric marking a stab wound in the back.” His red eyes lifted to meet Josephine’s. “They describe the tunic as linen, dyed green, with carved ironbark buttons.”

Josephine gasped and clasped a hand to her mouth, and Leliana slowly released a shaking exhale. The report described a gift Josephine had given Lavellan as a thank you for saving her family from financial ruin. “But there was no body?” she asked in a voice tense with both hope and fear.

Cullen shook his head. “It would appear she’s been taken.”

“What of Solas?” Josephine asked.

“He is not mentioned.” Cullen let his hands and the report fall limply to the desk. “Perhaps he abandoned her again.”

Leliana nodded, but Solas could not be their priority right now. “If the Venatori have her, they will take her North. We may be able to intercept them.”

“Yes. We should concentrate our forces along the coast and sweep the region north of their last known position.” He said the words slowly, as though each syllable took all his focus to utter.

Josephine bit her lip. “If there is blood at the campsite, could our people create a phylactery to track Lavellan?”

Cullen looked at her blankly for a moment. Leliana felt the tenuousness of his control. The news of Ahrue was unravelling him. He rubbed the back of his neck and Leliana noticed the repeated clenching and unclenching of his jaw. “Perhaps,” he said softly. “I’ll ask our people to try. But the… blood is likely too old to work. If it is not fresh, it loses its connection to the person who…” he trailed off. He was breaking.
Leliana stood up and circled behind him. “We will handle it, Cullen. You should take some time.”

She expected him to argue, to insist that he should work, that he couldn’t rest when Ahrue needed them. Instead, he nodded and slowly rose to his feet. His eyes flited to the wooden box on his desk and rested there for a while as he leaned against the desk to steady himself. He shook his head and sighed, walking for the door. “I will be in the chapel if I’m needed,” he said weakly and left.

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Iron Bull stared into the fire crackling in the hearth near the grand door of the great hall, regretting, for the second time, ever coming to the Inquisition. He should have just stayed in Ferelden with the Chargers, killing bandits and magic trees. He’d much rather be sleeping in flea infested brothels with his guys between jobs than lying awake in bed, night after night, deciding which friend he should betray. It was that day on the Storm Coast all over again: The Chargers or the Qunari. Ahrue had recognized the paralysis he’d felt watching the Vints moving up the shore, the Dreadnought vulnerable. She’d stepped in and saved the Chargers, and for what? To have one of his own stab her in the back? Now here he was again, with a paralyzing choice: a friend or a friend; the Inquisition or the Chargers; Ahrue or Grim.

Leliana’s word on the battlements had stuck with him: “Your Chargers are composed of murderers, outlaws, and outcasts. Do you know them all so well that you can be certain none of them…” For days he’d chewed on that, resisting the possibility that any one of his guys would do something like this. They all had had the information that the spy had given the Venatori, true. But Bull knew them. He would have anticipated their actions, known their motives, he would have noticed if something was amiss, would have heard it in their voices. They were his guys. But as he’d started going through them one by one in his mind to assure himself that there was no way Red had it right, when he got to Grim’s name, he had nothing. He didn’t know his history or motives because he’d never shared, couldn’t check the tone of his voice because he rarely spoke, and the guy had always acted like he had something he was hiding, so there was no contrast to judge by.

It was just the way Grim was. Bull hadn’t minded. Everybody has secrets. And Grim had never given Bull cause to think that his secrets were a danger to the Chargers, so he’d let it be. Probably was on the run from the law with a high enough price on his head for him not want to risk trusting people. Not a problem for Bull.

But with Leliana’s voice in his head, Bull kept returning to the fact that he really didn’t know Grim well enough to be sure he wouldn’t betray the Inquisitor. And if Grim was a Venatori informant, then Bull was to blame. It was Bull’s assurances that had made the boss trust the Chargers. She hadn’t doubted them for a minute. She knew they were a gang of murderers, thieves, and bandits, and she’d accepted Bull’s judgment on their trustworthiness just the same. So if one of them had
betrayed her, that was on him. And it was on him to fix it.

So after a few more nights of indecision, and a lot to drink, Bull had broken into the Charger’s barracks. They were still gone on their Ferelden trip, so their room was deserted. He’d started by searching Grim’s bunk. There was very little there; Grim had most of his gear with him on the road. Besides a couple shirts, a book, and a few odd and ends, there was nothing. Bull had pulled the blankets off the bed to be sure there wasn’t anything hidden there, and he’d just begun to remake the bed when he’d seen it: a thread dangling from the side of the mattress. He crouched down to get a better look; the thread dangled from a place where the seam had been pulled from the mattress. Bull twisted his fingers to reach inside of the mattress lining and felt the edges of a folded piece of paper inside. He’d contorted his hand to get a better angle and nabbed the corner of the paper between his index and middle fingers. With a grunt, he’d managed to pull the scrap free of the bedding.

Upon unfolding the paper, Bull had read the cryptic list. On each line, there was a color and a place written. Bull had pocketed the list and put the room to order, He was just preparing to leave, when the ashes in the hearth had caught his eye. On closure inspection, he’d found, settled near the edges of the fireplace, bits of charred paper that had not quite been consumed by the full heat of the fire. He could not make out more than bits of words, but he’d thought he saw Ahrue’s handwriting among the singed scraps.

The next day, a little poking around the aviary had proven that the colors paired with the places on Grim’s list was the color-code for Leliana’s birds: a green string tied around the ankle of the bird trained to fly to and from Denerim, a blue string for Orlais, a red string for Minrathous. All the major cities were on the list, as well as a few small but strategically important places, including Chalumeau.

Bull knew the evidence didn’t look good. What’s more, he felt in his gut that Grim was guilty. But still he sat on what he knew, continuing to check names off on the lists of suspects Leliana passed his way. The Chargers were still away, so he had a little time to figure it out before he had to make a choice and pick his loyalties. Or did he? The damage was done. With Ahrue gone and no one in the Inquisition privy to her movements, there wasn’t any more information for Grim to pass. And even if there was, Bull knew better now. Don’t tell the Chargers important stuff. Easy. Or, to be safe, they could just leave, tell Cullen that the Chargers would be moving on to greener pastures. No problem. Maybe Grim had some useful information that would speed up the resolution of the Venatori, Halviana situation, but Ahrue could take care of herself. And Leliana, Josephine, and Cullen would eventually figure it all out without him.

There was no good reason to turn Grim in. And if he did, Bull might lose the Chargers’ trust. If he would turn in Grim for passing information to the Venatori, what’s to stop him from turning Skinner in for killing human’s, or handing Dalish over to the Templars? And without trust, they weren’t his team. No, if he wanted to keep the Chargers, he would need to keep Grim out of the Inquisition’s hands. And Bull really wanted to keep the Chargers. They were all he had.
Yeah. When Grim and the Chargers got back, which should be any time now, Bull would talk to him, tell him what he knew, and Grim could explain why he did it, and tell Bull if he knew anything that might be useful. He was probably just a harmless patsy. If Grim knew anything that could be of help, Bull could send a letter the Inquisition’s way once the Chargers were a good distance from Skyhold. No need for an interrogation or punishment or worse. Bull could handle it. Grim was one of his, after all.

Bull was pulled out of his thoughts by the sound of the door to the garden opening and slamming closed. He turned to see Cullen stumbling his way, bottle in hand. “Hey, Boss,” Bull said to him, but Cullen walked by without a word or a glance, heading toward the rotunda. Drunk. That wasn’t like Cullen. His red eyes hadn’t escaped Bull’s notice either. Something was wrong, and Bull insides twisted. He entered the rotunda behind Cullen who took a seat on a sofa along the wall. He was looking at the fresco, face twisted in an angry grimace, drinking from the bottle. Bull knew that look; it looked like grief.

Iron Bull sat on the edge of the desk facing Cullen who looked at him blankly. “What’s going on, boss?” Bull asked, dread climbing in his throat.

“You know, I really hate this room,” he said venomously.

“I don’t know,” said Bull, looking around at the images on the wall depicting the exploits of the Inquisition. “Kind of nice to see all Ahrue did won’t be forgotten even though she’s moved on.”

Cullen snorted. “I don’t need his painting to remember what a remarkable woman she was.”

Bull heard the jealousy and the resentment that Cullen piled on the word “his,” but what hit him the heaviest was the word “was.” Cullen’s jaw tightened and he closed his eyes, fighting against the emotion that threatened to break, and Bull felt the full force of the unspoken news: Ahrue was dead. “Cullen. Ahrue okay?” Bull asked in a tightly controlled voice.

Cullen reached into his belt, pulled out a scroll, and tossed it to Bull. Bull read the report, and felt his own grief lighten, supplanted by the heaviness of worry building in his chest. Nothing was certain, but it seemed clear that Ahrue wasn’t okay. “What do you think happened?”

Cullen blinked the tears from his eyes. “I think,” he said, “that we failed her, Solas abandoned her, and now she’s…” He shook his head, unable to say the word that followed. He waved his arm in a sweeping motion, indicating the fresco. “She did all of this, saved us all, saved the world, and we
couldn’t even take down a single magister and a blighted spy for her. It was all she asked from us. And we failed.” He looked to the floor and his shoulders slumped. “Even if she still lives, we don’t know enough to help her. We lack the forces to do a full sweep of the region, and we certainly don’t have the men to guard the entire Tevinter border.”

The shame and gravity hit Bull like a blow. He was to blame for this. He’d been protecting a traitor when he should have headed to Ferelden immediately to drag Grim back to Skyhold and throw him in a cell for Leliana to wring out every last bit of information he had, like water from a wet cloth. If Grim had any information that could help the Inquisition keep the Magister for bleeding Ahrue dry with blood magic, or whatever it was, Bull would see that they got it. Bull sighed and a sense of certainty set in. He moved toward the door, turning briefly back to Cullen. “Horns up, Boss,” Bull said. “It’s not over yet.”

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Bull reached the Chargers about six miles down the road from Skyhold. They looked happy, but tired. All accounted for and a fair amount of loot weighing them down. Grim looked sullen as usual taking up the rear. Bull fought the urge to lower his horns and charge him at ramming speed.

“Hey, Chief!” Krem called out, waving brightly.

“Krem de la crème! There a reason you’re dragging your feet?” Bull called out brightly.

Krem smiled. “You miss us?”

“Nah, I was just worried that you’d tried to follow one of your maps home and ended up stuck in a ditch because it wasn’t properly labeled.” He chucked Krem on the arm when he got close enough and took in the smiling faces of his guys, the only family he had left. Even Skinner looked glad to see him.

He walked with the Chargers, listening as they colorfully regaled their journey. He loved these guys and they loved him. His stomach twisted with thought of what was ahead.

“So how did you keep busy without us?” Krem said grinning. “Or did you just plant yourself in the tavern and let all the pretty girls and boys take turn bouncing on your lap and feeding you cheese dip?”
The Chargers laughed and Rocky clapped Krem on the back while Dalish poked Bull in the ribs.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bull grunted. “Have your fun, but we’ve got something serious to discuss. Really serious.”

Krem raised an eyebrow. “What’s up, Chief?”

Bull turned to Grim. “You want to come up here, Grim?”

Grim froze and his skin flushed. With the blinders of friendship and loyalty off, Bull could see the dread in him, the fear at looking in Bull’s eyes. He wordlessly came to the front of the group to face Bull.

Bull folded his arms and looked down at him. “You want to tell them, or should I?” The muscles in Grim’s neck tightened and he bent his knees slightly. Bull shook his head. “I wouldn’t try to run if I were you. It won’t end well.”

“What’s going on, Chief,” Krem said, the joviality gone from his voice.

“What’s going on, Chief,” Krem said, the joviality gone from his voice.

“Grim?” Bull prompted.

Grim swallowed and looked away.

Bull sighed, wishing that Grim would just say it to save him from having to tell the others. But the little weasel wasn’t cooperating, so Bull carried on. “He’s been leaking information about the Inquisitor to the Vints. Information that probably just got her killed.”

The color drained from Grim’s face, and Krem laughed nervously. “Whoa, Chief. Are you having us for a laugh?”

“Afraid not,” he said, his eyes fixed on Grim. “Ahrue was injured and abducted for some sick magic ritual because he gave the Vints details about her journey and who knows what else. And I would really like to know why,” he said bending forward to bring his face inches from Grim’s.
“Why would you think it was me?” Grim said gruffly. Bull noticed that he was shaking.

“Don’t do that, Grim,” Bull warned. “I know it was you. And things will go a lot better for you if you walk with me to see Leliana, Cullen, and Josephine and you tell them everything you know.”

“And if I don’t?” he said weakly.

“I don’t think you want to go down that road. I have a feeling Leliana knows her way around a pair of pliers; you’re talking one way or another.” Bull glanced around at the gaping faces of his team. “Ahrue sacrificed an alliance with the Qunari to keep you all breathing, and this is how Grim repaid her: a knife in the back. Now I want to know why. Why did one of my people try to get my friend killed?”

“She was just an employer, Bull!” Grim shouted abruptly. “We’re mercenaries, not soldiers! We didn’t pledge our loyalty to her any more than we do to any puffed shirt noble who’s good to pay.” Grim looked around the group, searching for an ally, but found only mounting disgust on the faces of the Chargers. “She paid us to do a job, and we did it. A better offer came along is all. And I took it because I’m a bloody mercenary! No worse than we’ve all done dozens of times. I didn’t even kill anybody. The Magister fronted me the coin in exchange for updates on the Inquisitor. Not my fault that she decided to head off without her people.”

In a flare of rage, Bull pushed Grim to the ground. “What did you think the Vints would do to her, Grim?” he shouted as Grim tried to squirm out of Bull’s large shadow.

“How the fuck do you get off judging me for this?” Grim shouted, a fearful quiver belying the force of his words. “You think the Qunari were just using those reports you sent them for entertainment? One day they’ll invade, and they’ll be using the information you gave them to make it happen.” He spat.

Bull reached down and grabbed a fistful of Grim’s shirt collar, and lifted him easily off the ground while the man kicked and struggled. “March,” Bull snarled in his face, before setting him down on his feet and pushing him roughly forward.

Bull and the Chargers walked on in cold silence. Rocky positioned himself to Grim’s left, Skinner to Grim’s right. Bull felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to see Krem looking up at him smiling ruefully. “You did what you had to, Chief,” he said, and Bull felt a warmth building in his Chest. Then Krem took a deep breath and sang loudly, “No man can beat the Chargers, ’cause we’ll hit
you where it hurts! Unless you know a tavern with loose cards and looser skirts!” Before he even
got through the first line, the other Chargers (except Grim) joined in.

Bull smiled as he and his Chargers approached the front gates of Skyhold.
In the Woods

The closer Solas, Ahrue, and Dirtharavas got to Enansal’nan, the denser the forest grew. It was becoming a challenge to find a route that Dirtharavas could fit through. The low branches scratched Solas’ skin, and tore at Ahrue’s cloak. He looked down at her periodically and each time felt the jolt of shock at how very dead she looked. The chill of her skin against his, the limp vacant expression on her face, and the complete stillness of her body, twisted and deferred any pleasure he might have otherwise derived from their close contact. His only comfort was that she had not stiffened or deteriorated over the two days since her injury. This fact alone assured him that she was not dead; there was still a chance that she could be saved.

Solas knew, although they hidden from sight beneath Ahrue’s clothing, the dark tendrils that spindled out from her injury were merely frozen in their growth, not abated. They had already begun to branch through her lungs by the time he’d pressed the rune to her chest. Once the rune was removed, the tendrils would continue their path to her heart and other organs. In addition to that the dark magic or poison that infected the wound had disrupted his ability to heal the deep cut left by the dagger. He feared that the blade may have nicked an artery, doubly threatening the tenuous life of his beloved. Without the skilled administrations of an adept healer, Ahrue would undoubtedly die within hours, if not minutes, of being brought out of stasis.

Solas tried to distract himself from the fatalistic turn of his thoughts, focusing on other things. But all ruminations lead back to Ahrue; she had successfully infiltrated every corner of his mind. So he surrendered and leaned into the obsessive direction of his thoughts, letting the pain, the grief, the fear, the regret, the love, and the hope shudder through him like currents. He entertained thoughts of her death and her survival, imagined dozens of different scenarios between them: what he would say to her if she survived, how she would respond, how he might move forward in his efforts to repair the rift between them. He envisioned her forgiving him, her hating him, them building a life together, them resigning themselves to a life apart.

When pessimism overtook him, and he felt himself fixating melancholically on the likely negative outcomes ahead, he shifted to contemplate the twists of fate that had brought him and Ahrue together. After all this time he was still staggered and confounded by her singularity. She had been capable of wielding the anchor, and Solas believed firmly that she was the only one besides Corypheus who could have done so. How had fate so expertly delivered the one person who could stop Corypheus to the exact moment she was needed? And beyond that, how had she even come to exist? An apparently ordinary elven mage whose blood sang with a magic and memory that he’d thought completely lost to the people. How was she real? So heart-wrenchingly real.

Dirtharavas suddenly came to a stop, jarring Solas from his thoughts. The halla’s head turned to the left, ears perked and neck tensed, frozen in place. The foliage was too dense for Solas to see what the halla had sensed. It could be a wolf or more Venatori. Either way Solas did not want to wait for an impending fight. He tapped his heels into Dirth’s sides and clicked his tongue to urge her forward. Instead of following his instructions, she reared back, throwing Solas, and Ahrue on top of him, to the ground.
Solas cursed the beast and his poor riding skills. Dirth was unmoved by his words, as she stared statue-still, her eyes fixed to the east. Still sitting on the ground where the halla had thrown him, Solas grasped his staff as the panic built ringing behind his eyes. He knew the limits of his skill, and if the situation required him to fight off any more than two assailants by himself, he suspected the odds of survival would take a significant downward turn. He attuned his attention to the fade, and his heart threatened to break free from his ribs as he felt the nearby distortion of several mages summoning barriers. He counted two nearby to the East, another four a further distance north (which explained why the halla had tossed them rather than continue forward, and yet another two to the West.

Solas barely registered Dirtharavas nudging him as the gravity of their situation settled like a layer of ash on his mind and senses. He could not hold off a force of this size. With Ahrue’s help there might have been a slim possibility of survival, but without her, he could fight, but he would not win. Dirth gave him another dull head-butt on his shoulder, before circling him and moving south. She wanted him to follow, but running was of no use. If they mounted Dirtharavas, the foliage would slow their movement; on foot he would not be able to both run and carry Ahrue. He could imagine no possibility of escape or victory ahead for them.

Solas looked down at Ahrue who was still lying limply across his legs in the position she had landed when Dirth had thrown them. Solas frowned and stroked her cheek, letting the sting of his inevitable failure burn through him. “Ir abelas, ma vhenan,” he whispered to her. He felt suddenly very tired and very old. It was tempting to remain there on the ground as the forces gathered around them. What was the use in fighting? Why not claim this last moment of peace before the end? But looking at Ahrue, thinking of her stormy eyes and her unyielding fire, he pressed his hand briefly and tenderly to her abdomen before freeing himself from her weight and rising to his feet beside her. He summoned a barrier around them, knowing that it would not be enough, knowing that nothing he could conjure would be able to stand against eight mages and whatever mundane forces that accompanied them. They would kill him and take Ahrue.

If he was a stronger person, he would kill Ahrue himself to save her from the tortures of the transference ritual. But he could not focus his will to do her that mercy; his heart rebelled too strongly against it. Instead all he could do was make her a silent promise that they would not take her without first paying in blood. He took some selfish comfort in the fact that he would not have to witness her death, would not have to feel her life and power being leached from her; they would kill him first.

He stood straighter as the barest flicker of hope shimmered in his mind: there was a chance, however slim, that the Inquisition forces would yet rescue Ahrue from the hands of the Venatori. Once that hopeful thought occurred to him, he clung to it, found strength in it. He would die here, but Ahrue would live, and Mythal would be forced to restore the seal with her own soul, thereby freeing Ahrue and the child from her grip. Without him, without Mythal constantly impacting her life, Ahrue could find some peace. She could have the child without fear, or cut it loose, freeing herself from the last chain shackling her to a traumatic past. She would at last be governed by her will alone.
Solas smiled grimly as the first volley of fire came at them from the east. The barrier absorbed the multiple blasts before flickering out like a spent candle, and Solas sent his own fiery globe in the direction of a rogue rushing toward him. His spell connected, and the rogue screamed as his fellows charged. An arrow from the west whipped past Solas’ ear, narrowly missing him as it soared into the foliage and landed squarely between the eyes of a Venatori mage who had just come into view.

Solas turned around in stunned silence. Unsure if the arrow’s path had been a happy mistake or if allies were closing in on their position from the west. He could make out the form of a row of archers, partially obscured by the foliage. A voice from the west called, “Get down!” just as another arrow whizzed by his head, prompting Solas to flatten himself to the ground beside Ahrue. He quickly summoned another barrier around them just in time to absorb a bolt of energy intended for him. From his position on the ground, he noticed that the archers and mages to the west were not wearing shoes. And when one of the mages approaching from the north sent a focused telekinetic wave at a warrior barreling toward them, Solas sensed her channeling of the old songs in her deft manipulation of the fade. The Sentinels of the Vir’abelasan were fighting off the Venatori forces.

Solas pulled Ahrue close, assuring himself breathlessly that they would both survive this day. Even cold and still as she was, clinging to her now felt like a precious gift. Around them, the enemy had still not adapted to the abrupt shift in the balance of forces, and it was clear that he and Ahrue were still the center of their focus as spell and arrow collided with his barrier. The whizzing arrows overhead made it impossible for Solas to rise, so he focused his energy on maintaining the barrier around them, redirecting ambient energy discharged by the enemy mage’s spells back into the protective shield, and casting support spells on the Sentinel fighters on the forefront of the battle. An arcane warrior had taken up a position between them and the Venatori to fend off a Red Templar, while archers and mages sent projectiles flying expertly into their shrieking enemies. Solas was still in a state of giddy shock when, minutes after it had begun, the final Red Templar had fallen to her knees with a dull moan, as an elvhen warrior swung her blade in deadly contact with the Templar’s clavicle.

Solas turned to the sound of approaching legs behind him and was met with an outstretched hand. “It is over.” Solas hesitated, still unsure of what to make of this abrupt reversal of fortunes. “Peace, lethallin. We are here to help.” Solas took the offered hand, and Abelas pulled him to his feet.

“Ma serannas,” said Solas breathlessly. “We would not have survived without your help.” Roughly a dozen elvhen milled about the battle site, cleaning blood from their blades and searching the bodies of their fallen foes.

Abelas put a hand on Solas’ shoulder. “Are you injured at all?”
“No,” he said, hardly believing it. “Your timing was… fortuitous.”

“Indeed,” said Abelas with a knowing grin. But his smile quickly faded as a woman crouched to examine Ahrue. He furrowed his brow, taking in Ahrue’s still form, before asking hesitantly, “Is she…?”

“No,” said Solas. “But she is badly injured. Dark magic or poison in addition to a deep wound from a blade.”

“She is cold and she has no breath,” the woman said in a dark, frank tone. “The injury has taken her.”

“No,” Solas said again firmly. “She appears dead, but the rune on her chest, keeps her alive. She has been in this state for nearly two days.” He brought his pleading eyes to Abelas’ face. “The rune is all that sustains her. She does need a healer, desperately.”

Abelas nodded gravely. “We will see she is cared for once we’ve returned to Enansal’nan. You will both be safe there from the shemlen who are hunting you.” He waved two men carrying a stretcher to their position.

Of course the Sentinels had relocated to Enansal’nan. Whether they wished to enter Uthenera or simply live apart from the humans and elves removed from their own time, there was no place better suited to them than the hidden forest sanctuary. Solas watched as the two elfhen placed Ahrue gently on the stretcher while Dirtharavas trotted to their side, and snorted her disapproval at strangers handling her mistress. “It so happens, that Enansal’nan is exactly where we were headed,” Solas said, not entirely trusting the coincidence.

Abelas smiled. “We know.”

The two men lifted the stretcher while Ahrue’s body limply shifted with their movements. Solas put out a hand for them to stop and turned to Abelas with steely eyes as the reason for their timely presence dawned on him. “Mythal sent you, didn’t she?”

Abelas cocked his head. “She informed us that you and the Inquisitor were in danger and told us where you could be found. But we did not come as Mythal’s thralls, if that is what you are implying.” He put one hand on Ahrue’s shoulder and the other on Solas’ arm. “We came to help our sister and brother in their time of need.”
“You feel kinship with her?” Solas asked, taken aback by the affection of Abelas’ touch and words. A stark contrast to his cold distance from their first meeting in the Temple of Mythal. “Even though she is not elvhen?”

Abelas raised an eyebrow. “She is more elvhen than elf, as you well know, Fen’haril.”

His skin prickled at the name, but he sensed no rancor in Abelas’ voice. Solas nodded at the men holding the stretcher, and they began to carry Ahrue northward in the direction most of their fellows had already begun walking. Solas and Abelas fell into step at the rear, just behind Ahrue, her two caretakers, and the ever protective Dirtharavas. “You seem to know much of me,” Solas said, slipping into an old elven dialect from a time familiar to them both.

Abelas smiled. “I did not recognize you at first when we met in the Temple,” he said, continuing the conversation in Elvish. “But when you spoke to me at the Vir’abelasan, I realized that you were, like us, a man out of time. Mythal told me of your true identity later.”

Solas searched Abelas’ face for some sign of what he might think of coming face to face with the Dread Wolf. “You call me brother and use the kinder turn of my name. Should I assume you bear me no ill will?” he asked cautiously.

Abelas frowned but his gaze was warm and affectionate. “We remember when you alone stood against the madness that claimed the Uth’elgar’vhen. And we remember your attempts to unify a feuding people who were determined to follow their gods to destruction. Some of our number hold you as highly as they do Mythal. And others,” he added with a nod, “hold you higher.”

Solas reddened as much from gratitude as discomfort. He felt even less worthy of reverence now than he’d felt when the first shrines to Fen’haril had started to appear. “I’m just a man,” he said softly.

“We know. But a man worthy of honor and respect, just the same.”

Solas was surprised but grateful. He wondered how Ahrue would have responded to what Abelas was saying. Would she bite back that Solas’ errors had plagued the world with the blights, that Corypheus would never have killed so many of their kin if Solas had not given them the orb? Or would her expression soften with pleasure at hearing that in his time Solas had done the best he could manage in terrible circumstances.
Following the direction of Solas’ gaze, Abelas asked, “Does she know who you are?”

He smiled slightly. He believed on some level she had always known who he was. Not the details, of course, not the names and events that had shaped who he was, but she had understood him intuitively from the beginning. Now other factors competed with her intuition: her Dalish heritage, the staggering results of his actions, and the fact that he had deceived her and abandoned her when she had needed him. “We… have discussed it. At length.”

“A difficult conversation, I take it?” asked Abelas with a sympathetic smirk.

Solas had to laugh at the understatement. “To put it mildly.”

“And yet you remain by one another’s side.”

Abelas was trying to be reassuring, but the words dug into Solas sharply. “By no choice of her own,” he snapped. “Your god keeps her chained to me through the geas.”

Abelas cocked his head as he searched the bitterness in Solas’ expression. “You are angry with Mythal,” he said with a note of surprise.

Solas wondered if his feelings regarding Mythal would offend her followers but cared little. “I do not approve of how she has treated Ahrue. And I do not trust Mythal’s intentions for future use of her. She wields the geas aggressively, and Ahrue suffers for it far more than is necessary.”

Abelas tightened his mouth. “Perhaps I should warn you then: Mythal awaits your arrival in Enansal’nan.”

Solas started and his stomach dropped. He had not expected this encounter to come so soon. “She is there? Physically?” he asked, not sure of what to make of this.

“Yes.”
Anger burned in Solas’ blood and he grabbed Abelas roughly by the arm. “And you plan to deliver Ahrue to her?” Perhaps they were not so free of their thralldom after all.

“No,” he said calmly, “I planned to see you both to safety.” He placed his hand over the hand that grasped his arm, and the fraternity of the gesture took some of the fire out of Solas’ indignation. “This is not a trap, Fen’haril, at least not of my making. And I know of no ulterior motives on Mythal’s part; I assumed her interest in your and your mate’s wellbeing was genuine.”

Solas’ skin warmed at Abelas calling Ahrue his mate. It wasn’t an entirely accurate description, but he wasn’t sure what label would be more appropriate, so he let it stand. He released Abelas’ arm and sighed.

“What exactly is your concern?” Abelas asked as they resumed walking. “It was my understanding that you and Mythal were allies.”

Solas snorted. “I was under the same impression. But her recent actions have forced me to reevaluate that perception. With every blow she deals Ahrue, she makes more the enemy of me.”

“By controlling her with the geas?”

“Yes. Among other things.”

Abelas nodded thoughtfully. “Regardless of Mythal’s intentions toward you and your mate, no harm can be done to any within the boundaries of the sanctuary. You will be safe.”

Solas wondered if possessing their child constituted “harm” by Enansal’nan’s standards. Whatever threat Mythal’s presence may pose, Ahrue needed the administrations of a skilled healer. Seeing her healed was worth any risk, and he believed Ahrue would agree. Besides, if Flemeth did decide to possess the child now, it would make some things far simpler in the long run.
Solas could sense the thinning of the veil as they approached Enansal’nan, just before Abelas said in a hushed voice, “We are quite close.” In another minute, there was a shimmering effect as the Sentinels at the front of the group disappeared. Solas stepped to Ahrue’s side so as to avoid losing sight of her when she passed across the boundary; whatever protection the sanctuary provided, he did not want to leave her alone with Mythal nearby, not even for a moment. In another few steps, Solas felt the cold tingling of the spell on his skin, and in an instant, where once there had been an endless stretch of trees, before him stood the unearthly, ancient beauty of Enansal’nan.

Solas had been away from the sanctuary for millennia, but it appeared entirely unchanged. Before him, a silvery stream glistened in the perpetual moonlight that suffused the place in a soft calming light. Large black fish gathered where the stream widened into a small pond. Ahead, the stream narrowed and split, forking between the three colossal trees that dominated the glade. Glowing orbs hung suspended, lighting the crystal steps that wrapped around the trunks, leading to the various chambers high in the trees where all manner of people from slaves to gods had once sought solace. Solas suspected Mythal likely occupied one of those chambers currently, patiently awaiting their arrival, perhaps watching them at this very moment.

Pavilion tents of jewel-toned silks, billowing lightly in the mild breeze, dotted the glade. What space remained was taken up by the gardens. These were not the orderly, austere gardens favored by humans, every plant in its straight row, roses segregated from carrots. The gardens of Enansal’nan were an ecstatic mingling of the practical and the beautiful held together in a wild unity. He ached to walk these grounds with Ahrue, to see her enraptured face alight with its magic.

The men carrying Ahrue brought her to a tent near the base of the westernmost of the three trees, Solas, Dirtharavas, and Abelas at their heels. The silk drapery of the pavilion was gathered and cinched by thick golden rope at the entrance. Within, a chaise lounge of pale gold, draped with violet blankets and gold-embroidered pillows, stood at the center. A woman, likely as ancient as Enansal’nan itself, stood with her back to them, hunched over a long table crowded with herbs and various glass, wooden, and metal vessels (some of which were emitting smoke). Solas breathed deeply the distantly familiar scent of a true Elvhen apothecary. Tension he hadn’t even been aware he was holding released as he was flooded with confident gratitude that this old healer would be able to save Ahrue.

“Lay her down,” the old woman said in a rasping Elvish, her back still to them. The men obeyed, gently transferring Ahrue to the chaise, and bowing to Abelas and Solas before departing. “Undress her, da’len,” the woman instructed Solas gruffly with a snap of her fingers.

Solas smiled, grateful that she had no more reverence for him than she had for the Sentinels. To her he was just another child making claims on her time. He crouched at Ahrue’s side and began removing her armor. As he set the pieces on the ground, Abelas gathered them and moved them to
a trunk at the side of the pavilion. Solas removed her clothing with care, noting with a shudder the
pernicious tendrils that spread down and across her back and over her right shoulder before turning
her to her left side and propping her against a pillow to give the healer full view of the wound. He
covered her with the soft woven blanket, folded the clothes, and handed them to Abelas who
placed them with her armor in the chest.

Their task completed, the old woman turned to face them. She began to circle Ahrue, rubbing her
hands together while humming a low wandering tune. Solas knew she was manipulating the fade to
assess Ahrue’s condition, but she stopped abruptly and pointed at Ahrue’s chest. “Remove that.”

Solas’ jaw tightened. “Hahren, the rune is keeping her alive,” he said in a tensed voice. “If I
remove it…”

She shook her head. “I can neither sense what ails her nor do anything to save her while it blocks
her life’s energies. You must remove it.” She snapped her fingers again to hurry him.

Still Solas hesitated, fearing that death would take Ahrue faster than the healer would be able to
neutralize the poison or dark magic and heal the injury. Abelas put his hand on Solas’ shoulder.
“Ilaran is very skilled, lethallin. Whatever chance your beloved has is with her.”

His words brought little comfort, but he was right. If Ahrue could not be healed while the rune was
active, then removing it was a necessary risk. With a heavy exhale, Solas knelt beside her and
pressed his hand to the golden disk with its runic etchings that clung by magic to Ahrue’s chest. He
channeled his magic through the disk, breaking its link to her, and it detached into his hand.

As soon as the rune was removed, Ilaran resumed her humming and circling. For a while, Ahrue
remained deathly still, and panic gripped Solas as he wondered if she was already lost to him. But
then one of her fingers twitched, and her breath returned to her in a pained gasp. Seeing the signs of
death fall from her shook Solas to his core. She was alive, and no matter how briefly or long it may
last, that was a gift. He took Ahrue’s cold hand in his own as Ilaran stopped her circling and began
attending to the wound on Ahrue’s back, still humming.

“Vhenan,” Ahrue mumbled softly in a low rasping voice, fingers tightening weakly around his, her
eyes still closed.

The sound of her voice and the responsiveness of her touch brought tears to Solas’ eyes even
though he knew she spoke out of a state of delirium. “I am with you, ma’arlath,” he said, his own
voice unsteady.
She moaned and pinched her lips in a grimace as Ilaran probed the wound.

Solas smoothed her hair with his free hand and hushed her. “You are being cared for; the pain will be over soon,” he promised, not knowing if his words of comfort bore any truth.

Ahrue’s eyes fluttered open. She looked at him in a confused haze. “Sol… Solas?”

Hearing his name on her lips brought a tingling warmth to his chest that spread outward until his whole body was suffused with the comforting heat that had been held at bay by so many hours of contact with her cold limp form. Now the chill was fading from her skin, and the vacant expression had left her face. He held her cheek and smiled. “Yes. I’m here.”

She cried out again in pain and pulled away from Ilaran’s ministrations. “Keep her still!” the old healer barked.

Solas grasped Ahrue’s shoulders firmly, watching the fog continue to lift from her face. “What happened?” she asked, groaning again as Ilaran pressed a pungent poultice to her back.

Solas’ breath caught as he took note of the spreading infection that had now begun to climb Ahrue’s neck. Without the rune holding them at bay, the tendrils had resumed their growth. He returned his focus to Ahrue’s face, trying to hide his worry from her. “You were badly wounded, but a healer is tending to you now.”

She inhaled with a wheezing whimper and Solas had to hold her still as she again reflexively tried to pull away from Ilaran’s touch. “Creators this hurts,” she said breathlessly. “Am I dying?”

Solas looked at the healer who was already in the process of removing the blood soaked poultice and replacing it with another. She tutted.

“Can you do nothing for the pain?” Solas asked in Elvish, not wanting to think of the answer to Ahrue’s question.

Ilaran shook her head and said, “Awake is better.”
“You sure about that?” Ahrue asked in Elvish, laughing weakly as a tear streaked her cheek.

“\textit{I am certain, Da’len,}” Ilaran responded with far more softness in her voice than Solas had heard from her so far.

Ahrue’s eyes fluttered, and Solas wondered if she would be able to maintain consciousness regardless of the healer’s recommendation. “Solas,” Ahrue said following another gasp of pain. “I need to tell you something.”

There was an urgency to her voice that repelled Solas. “\textit{No, don’t speak, vhenan,}” he said, brushing the beads of sweat from her brow. “\textit{We’ll talk after you are healed.}”

She grasped his forearm with as much strength as she could probably muster and fixed him with a determined stare. “\textit{No, vhenan, it can’t wait,}” she said firmly.

Seeing the way the spindling tendrils had begun to climb across her chest and throat, he felt the air leave the room as he fought the feeling that this may be the end. “Please,” he whispered, closing his eyes, wanting desperately to maintain the belief that she would live. But Ahrue continued despite his objections.

“Solas, clan Sabrae is near Kirkwall. Roughly two days west of the city. They’ll have the arulin’holm.” Her words were slightly slurred, and it seemed to take a great deal of energy and focus for her to say them.

Solas shook his head violently, knowing that she was giving him the information she had previously kept secret in light of the possibility that he would have to carry on with his quest in her absence. “\textit{No,}” he said firmly. “\textit{I’ll need you there. Only a Dalish can evoke Vir Sulevanin. We will go together once you are well.}”

She ignored him. “\textit{Varric’s friend, Daisy,}” she said in a voice braced against barely manageable pain, “\textit{she’s a Dalish, I don’t know which clan. She could help you.}”

“\textit{Stop!}” he shouted, unable to accept the spoken and unspoken content of her words. “\textit{You will not die! We have endured too much for this to be the end!}”
Ahrue half coughed and half laughed, and in a surprise gesture of tenderness, brought her hand to Solas’ cheek. “I entirely agree. But I’m not sure that we have any say in the matter.”

Solas was crying openly at this point, feeling her slipping from him. “I should not have left. I should have remained with you and told you the truth then.”

“You’re only just now getting that?” she asked with a grimace he supposed was meant to be a smile. Her breath was quick and shallow, almost a pant, and her eyes kept threatening to roll back.

He grabbed her tightly with the desperate and irrational belief that he could keep her with him if he just held on. “I can make it right, Ahrue! Just live through this, and you will see: everything we had, we can have again. We can have more! Just live,” he pleaded, tears streaming down his face.

“It’s a nice offer, but…” A chough cut her off and they both saw the blood it left in its wake. She took a long whistling inhale that gutted Solas with the effort and pain it caused her. The tendrils must have burrowed deep into her lungs by now, choking her from within. “Ar lath ma,” she said with a sad smile and tear-filled eyes, her words barely audible through the wheezing.

He shook his head and pressed his lips together, not able to accept her words as the farewell she intended. Those words should not be said here and now. They were words that should point forward, not words used to mark an ending. “This is not the end,” Solas said fervently, thinking that if he could convince her, maybe it would be so.

With those words, a sudden flash of bright light filled the tent, momentarily blinding Solas. Ahrue screamed out in an agony like none he’d ever heard. He felt her go limp beneath his touch. As his vision cleared, he saw her eyes were closed and her expression relaxed. He looked up at Ilaran, pleading.

“She lives. For now,” Ilaran said, anticipating his question. “As does the child. The infection had not yet reached it.”

“Had not?” Solas said, clinging to the hope of the past tense. He looked down at Ahrue and saw the black tendrils slowly receding. “You have healed her?”

Ilaran pressed her hand to Ahrue’s back and channeled her magic through her in a healing glow. “I have dispelled the curse. But it caused much damage to her lungs and heart, and she lost a great deal of blood.” She lifted her eyes to Solas and gifted him a rare crooked smile. “But I believe she
will live.”

A world of possibilities opened at those words. Solas stood up laughing and crying, shaking Ilaran’s hand in a daze of relief and gratitude and immediately crouched back down to kiss Ahrue’s brow and cheek. “Ar lath ma, vhenan,” he said to her as he stroked her sweat matted hair. “Ar lath ma.”

A distantly familiar voice came from behind Solas, abruptly countering his joy with a sick dread: “Ah, such tenderness, my wolf! I almost hesitate to intrude.” He turned to see Flemeth sauntering toward him, grinning. “But I have been so looking forward to our reunion.”
The white haired human who walked toward Solas with a twisted smile and mocking eyes was not
the Mythal he’d known, and yet he recognized her. When they’d met in the fade she’d chosen to
appear to him as the raven-haired, willowy, elvhen beauty he’d known long ago. But he knew
she’d shed that physical form the day the unseen assassin had cut that part of her life short. Her
soul, by that time inseparable from the spirit of justice to which she had bound herself, had slowly
regenerated itself in the fade. As the legends had it, a human woman had called out to her in her
rage and thirst for vengeance, and Mythal had taken the opportunity to again bind herself to a
mortal form. And again, she’d been transformed, joining seamlessly with her new host. But
Shemlen mortality did not appeal to Mythal, so she discovered a ritual to transfer herself to a new
host, leaving behind the empty shell of her former body. However, not just any body would do. She
would not see herself diminished by joining with an ordinary human. Mythal wanted only hosts
with the potential for great magical power. So she bred her hosts, finding a powerful mage to sire a
child that she would bear, raise, and later join with. With each generation she changed, as a new
soul was integrated with the old.

The process had served her well. Until Morrigan, it would seem. Consent posed a problem for
Mythal; joining with a soul required a willing host. And while Mythal had become an expert in
manipulating people to do her bidding, and had raised each of her daughters to value power above
all else, somehow she had made a misstep with her youngest daughter, and Morrigan had become
poisoned against her. Surprising. From Solas’ experience with the woman, she’d seemed to be
perfectly groomed to find the power of an old god utterly irresistible, no matter the cost. Yet
something had gone wrong in Mythal’s plan, and Morrigan had been unwilling to undergo the
ritual, leaving Mythal with an aging body and no ideally suited host to move on to.

But there was a loophole in the joining ritual. Only a host with a soul had to be willing, making an
unborn host a viable, though far less desirable, option for Mythal. And Ahrue and Solas’ child had
the advantage of being the offspring of two uncommonly powerful mages, virtually guaranteeing
that they would inherit considerable magical aptitude. Additionally, Solas surmised, it was entirely
possible that the child would be elvhen, thereby freeing Mythal from the tiresome process of
rearing her future hosts, and never again having to face the possibility of an unwilling daughter.
She would just need to tolerate a decade or two of youthful vulnerability before her new host’s
magic would come to its fulness. At least such were the thoughts that Solas ascribed to his old
friend. She had, of course, neglected to consult with him regarding her plan to possess his child.

Seeing Mythal here now, circling Ahrue like a shark preparing for the kill, made Solas’ blood
burn. His lip twisted in a snarl as she placed her hand to Ahrue’s belly. “Oh, she is coming along
nicely,” she said, voice sickly sweet and barbed. “In just a few months, she’s sure to bring your
healthy pup squalling into the world.”

He clenched his hands into fists and felt his palms heat with the power that the magic of
Enansal’nan prevented him from letting loose. “Why are you here?” he asked, with as much spite
as he could pack into the words.
Mythal cocked her head and pouted. “You sound as though you aren’t happy to see me, Fen’haril!” she said, feigning offense and shock. “Or do you prefer ‘Solas’ now?”

He snorted. “I do not care what you call me. But do not insult me by pretending I don’t see through your charade of amicability.”

One corner of Mythal’s mouth twisted in a half grin. “Shall we go for a walk, my dear wolf?” she said brightly, gesturing toward the entrance of the tent.

Solas’ nostrils flared. “I am not leaving her side.”

Mythal smirked and took a seat by Ahrue’s feet, resting a hand on her leg. “Indeed? I have never known you to be so protective. In fact, I can’t recall you ever showing much interest in romance or family at all. Are you at last feeling the sting of your mortality that you should choose to sire an heir after all this time?”

Seeing Mythal digging her fingers into Ahrue’s thigh made Solas think better of his decision to converse with Mythal in her presence. He wanted her as far away from Ahrue as possible. He stood up, body aching with tension. “Abelas,” he said, eyes still fixed on the witch, “would you remain with Ahrue while Mythal and I converse outside?”

“Ma nuvenin, Fen’haril,” Abelas said with a bow. “I will come for you if her condition changes.”

Mythal grinned her victory over Solas, and she rose, patting Ahrue twice on the thigh—a gesture that set Solas’ teeth on edge—and walked with him into the garden.

“She is a strong and vibrant one, your Ahrue, even as she stands at death’s door. I can see why you have become so enamored with her.”

Solas whirled on her. “And is that why you find her so appealing?” he said venomously. “Does it satisfy you to cow one such as her to your will? Do you enjoy toying with me by flaunting your power over her?”

Mythal narrowed her eyes and rested a hand on her hip. “So much anger. Given I just saved both
your lives, I expected some gratitude. Perhaps even a ‘thank you.’”

“Thank you,” he said curtly, his nostril twitching in a scowl. “But let’s not pretend that you sent your people to our aid for my sake or hers. You simply did not want to risk losing three useful tools.”

“I believe we both have a gift for making full use of the talents and capacities of those who cross our paths,” she said blandly. She lifted her hands in a shrug. “Waste not, want not, my dear friend.”

He grimaced at her words. There was some truth to what she said, but he would not grant her claim to their likeness. “Why her? Why of all the people in this world did you have to sink your claws into the one I care for?” he demanded. “Could you not have left her and the child alone, for the sake of a very old friendship if nothing else?”

“My, aren’t you possessive!” she said with teasing levity that refused to acknowledge his hurt or anger. “Setting aside the fact that she drank from my Well of her own volition, if we are to get technical, I had my ‘claws’ in her long before you crossed paths. The prior claim on her is mine. And I have put far too much time and effort into her to cast her aside just to protect your feelings.”

“So you did have a hand in bringing her to the Conclave then,” he said with satisfaction and a quiver of rage in his voice. “What did you do to convince her Keeper to send her to Haven?”

Mythal chuckled. “Oh, Asha’belannar has her ways. Old debts, promises of favor, vague threats; the Dalish are well aware of the advantages of staying on my good side. However, I began this particular game well before the Conclave was called for.”

“Meaning what?”

“Surely you felt it in her, Fen’haril: her connection to the old songs and the fade is unlike any young mage has managed in over a thousand years.”

“You mean to say you had some hand in the way she manipulates magic. You groomed her so she would be able to control the anchor.”

“In a sense,” Mythal said, inspecting the claws of her silverite gauntlet.
“In what sense, precisely?” Solas was quickly losing patience with this guessing game.

“Ahrue has a unique lineage. One that I have had some hand in crafting,” she said in a bored tone while she buffed a smudge from her armored hand.

Solas furrowed his brow and tensed his eyes into a dangerous glare. He waited for her to continue, not wishing to venture a guess as to what she might mean, but knowing that it could be nothing good.

“She carries the bloodline of the Uth’elgar’vhen. The only one in the world descended from all eight of us.”

He raised an eyebrow, more curious than surprised. “Ah, and did she come by this esteemed lineage by chance or design?”

“A little of both,” she said, her grin widening. “I gave one or two couples a slight push when necessary. But by and large, it seems that like seeks like. When our descendants encounter one another, it takes very little encouragement before bondings are arranged… or bastards are conceived.”

Solas’ stomach dropped sickeningly. “And what form does this ‘encouragement’ take?”

She waved her hand with a flourish. “A full moon, a warm breeze, and a thin veil humming through their blood. It’s all about setting the mood to see those inhibitions fall away at exactly the right moment.”

He seethed, catching her meaning. “So you’re well on your way to having the full set! Now that you’ve so skilfully maneuvered me into throwing my own blood into the mix!”

“There’s no need for the dramatics, Wolf. You did most of the work yourself. As I said, ‘like seeks like.’ Your feelings for one another are real enough, and most of your… encounters were of your own making. But time was running short, and she was at the fullness of her cycle, so I gave you a little a push to make sure you took full advantage of the moment. No different than if I’d lit some candles and sprinkled rose petals and jasmine oil on your bed.”
Solas took a threatening step toward her, his distorted face inches from Mythals. “No different? You manipulated us into conceiving a child that you have every intention of possessing! Why? What possible use do you have for a descendant of the Uth’elgar’vhen?”

Her mocking smile faded. “That is more than I will say. But there is power in blood, Fen’haril, knowledge in blood. And I have been waiting a very long time for the power and knowledge that your child’s blood will carry.” She frowned and put a hand on his tensed arm. “I regret that this is the way it must be, old friend. If I had any other option…”

He roughly thrust her arm from him. “You do have another option: let it go! Free Ahrue from the geas, let the child alone, and find another host. Surely one of your followers would be willing. You have enough power and knowledge without taking my child and enslaving my mate. Just let them go.”

Mythal placed her hands on her hips, her stance firm and unyielding. “No. I will not abandon this opportunity, not even for you, Wolf.”

Solas frowned, and an unexpected sadness settled on him. “Then I believe we have nothing left to say to one another.” He turned to leave, walked two steps, and then looked back over his shoulder at her, this stranger who was determined to hurt and control those dearest to him. “You were once my closest friend,” he said in a low voice. “But you have been corrupted, altered beyond recognition. The Mythal I knew is dead. You are no different from the others of the Elgar’vhen, Flemeth.”

He had continued his departure when Flemeth halted him again. “Wait a moment, Wolf.” Solas turned to see her smiling thinly at him. “You don’t think I came here just to taunt you, do you?”

He folded his arms. Of course not. There was something she wanted. There was always something she wanted. “What is it,” he asked, voice betraying his exhaustion. He wanted to be rid of her.

“I have a proposition for you. A compromise.”

He snorted. “A compromise. Why would you need to compromise? I can’t stop you from anything you plan.”

She sauntered toward him. “Right,” she said dryly. “You have no intention of killing me once I inhabit your offspring?”
Solas’ eyes narrowed. He’d expected that she might anticipate their plan, but there was also very little she could do to prevent it. It was not what he wanted, but he would be willing if she forced his hand by taking the child.

“We are in something of a stalemate. I can’t take the child as long as you pose a risk to me, and you won’t sacrifice yourself to renew the sanctum’s seal until you believe I am no longer a danger to your mate and offspring.” Her face darkened. “But we are both up against a clock: the seal is weakening, and your mate’s pregnancy is advancing. It is difficult to say which of us will run out of time first.”

He snorted. “You don’t want the seal to rupture any more than I do.”

“Almost true,” she said with a tilt of her head. “But I’m willing to wager that you will fold, whereas I will risk everything to have that child. You are, after all, the responsible party for the predicament posed by the weakening seal, and I suspect you’d rather see your child possessed than witness the consequences of your mistakes rip the world apart.”

Solas tensed. He honestly wasn’t sure how far he’d be willing to carry this. He loved Ahrue, but she would not see her own freedom or the life of their child as more important than protecting the world from more blights. If it came down to a choice between her or the world, she would want him to seal the sanctum and let Mythal possess the child.

“And if you do wait me out,” Mythal continued, “and the child is born before I can take it, forcing me to move on to another host, what’s to stop me from taking your grandchild one day? I have waited thousands of years for the chance to claim this bloodline. What’s another twenty? I’ll still have Ahrue under the geas… and she was with child when she drank from the Well, so the same spell that binds her to me will bind your daughter.” Mythal shrugged. “It will be easy enough to see to it that your offspring conceives young, providing me with another host with the appropriate bloodlines. And the next time, you won’t be there to stop me.”

Solas’ hands burned. “If you are trying charm me into being agreeable, you are sorely failing,” he growled through barely controlled rage.

“I am simply accurately describing how I will adapt in the event of your temporary ‘victory.’ It is important that you understand the impossibility of keeping me from my goal.”

His nostrils flared. “I could kill the child now.”
Mythal nodded. “True. But the geas would still hold Ahrue, and I believe that is what disturbs you far more than having your child possessed.” Her face darkened and she took a step toward Solas, the air billowing around her in a black smoke. “And if you did dare to destroy the child,” she said, her voice soft and rough, filled with a power that threatened to eviscerate him where he stood, “Ahrue would bear the brunt of my vengeance for as long as she lives.”

Solas shuddered against his will, as a combination of fear and bloodlust chilled his veins. More than ever before, he felt certain that Mythal needed to die.

Mythal’s mouth turned in a grin and the smoke cleared. “I don’t think either of us wants that, and I’d rather not wait another generation to be in possession of the knowledge and power of the bloodline I’ve so carefully fostered; I’ve grown bored with waiting. So, let’s each prioritize what we want and see if we can’t come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.

“What do you have in mind,” Solas snarled, wanting very much to watch her burn.

“You want Ahrue free from the geas, I want the child. I’m proposing a bargain: You agree to let me take the child, guaranteeing no harm will come to me in my vulnerable state; I agree to free your beloved from the geas. I’ll arrange to have my new host taken away from the mother upon its birth, and Ahrue will be released. She will never see nor hear from me again, and she’ll be free to live her life in whatever manner she chooses.”

Solas was taken aback. “You’d agree to that?”

“Well, it’s not ideal,” she said wryly, “but we’re both making concessions here. We each get what we want most out of this arrangement.”

Mythal had him. It was a price he was willing to pay. But the decision was not his to make. “I… will speak to Ahrue about your offer.”

Mythal’s eyes flashed with victory. “See that you do. I will remain here until a decision has been reached.” She turned to leave. “And do give Ahrue my best,” she said over her shoulder as she walked away, leaving an icy chill in her wake that wilted the flowers.
Josephine and Leliana exchanged confused and worried glances across the war table as the raucous stomping, shouting, and singing drifted their way. It seemed to be coming from the great hall, but as the noise grew louder, they realized whoever and whatever was causing the uproar was coming their way. Soon the doors to the war room burst open and the entire compliment of the Bull’s Chargers cheered. Bull pushed the man at the front of the group forward roughly, and he collided with the war table, upturning a few map markers, much to Josephine’s chagrin.

“Sorry to interrupt, ladies,” said Bull, “but I think Grim here has somethings to say that you’re gonna want to hear.”

Leliana raised an eyebrow. Bull’s face was not the mask of calm joviality he usually wore. His expression was clouded with an inscrutable emotion that Leliana had seen him wear only once or twice before, and his shoulders were slumped slightly. The Chargers were easier to read: most of them were staring daggers at the one Bull had called Grim. Grim was flushed and grimacing, avoiding eye contact with everyone. Krem looked up at Bull with a frown and furrowed brow. Based on the display, Leliana could only assume that Bull had found the spy among his Chargers, a revelation that no doubt had hit him and his people hard.

Grim maintained his quiet for too long, and Bull’s lip began to curl. He lifted his boot to give Grim a firm reminder to his tailbone that silence was not an option. Grim’s chin hit the table on his way down, and when he returned shakily to his feet, there was blood on his lips. He smeared the blood with the back of his hand as he cast Bull a sidelong scowl over his left shoulder. Grim began shakily, in a low growling voice: “Some Vint magister named Brutes contacted me just after the mess with Corypheus was over.”

Leliana noticed Josephine’s fingers tighten around her clipboard while a few of the Chargers shook their heads in disgust.

“Told me he needed someone to keep an eye on what the Inquisition was up to, particularly anything to do with Lavellan. Just a few letters here and there, making sure they caught wind of any gossip or news around the hold.” He jerked his head in Bull’s direction. “You know, a lot like what some people did for the Qunari.”

“Keep talking, Grim,” said Bull in a low warning.

“I didn’t kill anybody, and the stuff I passed was nothing! Just a few notes about the Inquisition troop compliments, a message about the Inquisitor being up the duff, and a couple notes about her
leaving the Inquisition,” said Grim, the anxiety rising in his voice. “Most of it would have reached the Venatori by word of mouth eventually.”

Bull grabbed the man’s neck, and bent him forward so the side of his face was pressed against the table, bending his nose awkwardly. “You told the Vints that she was going to the Graves alone.” Bull said through gritted teeth, phlegm flecking Grim’s face. “They had time to flood the Dales with their forces, because of you!”

Josephine cast Leliana a worried look, presumably fearing that Bull might kill the man in front of them. Leliana didn’t share her concern, and even took some pleasure in watching Grim’s nose break against the table, but she raised her hand. “That will do for now, Bull,” she said calmly.

Bull hesitated before slamming Grim’s head into the table again and stepping back, cracking his knuckles. Krem patted Bull’s shoulder while Rocky gave him an approving nod. “What do you want me to do with him, Red?” Bull asked.

“Take him to a cell. I’ll be there to… speak with him shortly.”

Bull grabbed Grim by the back of the neck and smiled wickedly as he whispered the word “Pliers” in the man’s ear. Before escorting Grim from the room, Bull reached into his belt and pulled out a piece of paper, which he tossed on the table. “Found it hidden in his mattress. Recognize what it is?”

Leliana picked it up and looked it over. She recognized the color-coding of her birds immediately. “Thank you, Bull. I understand.”

Bull nodded and dragged Grim from the room, the other chargers surrounding them.

Leliana leaned against the table, drumming her fingertips against the map. Bull’s discovery of the spy might have been more satisfying if they hadn’t received the news from the field about Ahrue’s apparent death or abduction twelve hours earlier. If she was on her way to Tevinter with her captors, it was virtually impossible that any information gleaned from interrogating Grim would come to anything useful before she would be delivered into Halviana’s hands. Or she may already be dead, in which case retaliation would be their only recourse.

“What will you do with him?” Josephine asked with an edge to her voice that mirrored the anger, frustration, and grief that weighed on Leliana.
“That is for the Inquisitor to decide,” said Leliana.

Josephine shook her head. “Do you really think he is in any position to think reasonably about this right now? Do you recall how he responded to Samson? His men had to pull him off of him lest he kill the man.”

Leliana nodded grimly. “He is a man of deep feelings, and objectivity is not his strong suite. However, I doubt any of us are feeling particularly objective at the moment,” she said thinking of the blood rage in Bull’s eyes as he slammed Grim’s face into the table. “I will conduct an initial interrogation, and we’ll see how cooperative Grim is willing to be. If we can give Cullen a target to aim his grief at, he might be less likely to take his feelings out on the spy.”

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It was early morning by the time Leliana was finally satisfied that she knew everything Grim knew. Now she sat in her aviary penning letters and trying to stifle a yawn. The interrogation of Grim was as worthwhile as Leliana could have hoped. It was also relatively bloodless. Bull had softened him up a bit, and by the time Leliana reached him, he was quite willing to speak with her. As a true mercenary, Grim knew how to follow which way the wind was blowing, and just as the Inquisition had failed to inspire loyalty in the man, Grim’s loyalty to the Venatori was spent as easily as the coin they’d paid him. Preserving his life was now his top priority, and pointing out his contacts seemed like the best way to ensure that he wouldn’t find his neck on the business end of the new Inquisitor’s blade.

However, as Leliana suspected, the mercenary had limited information of use to them. He knew some names of contacts at various key points throughout Thedas. If he were to hear that the Inquisitor was sending someone to meet with the King, he was to send a coded message there directly to the spy stationed in the castle, so they could prepare in advance of the Inquisition’s arrival. He told Leliana that the primary reason for the network was that there was apparently great concern among the Venatori that Ferelden, Orlais, and the Free Marches might yet attack the Imperium, particularly if the Venatori were successful in their attempts to take Lavellan. With a little… encouragement and a promise that he would not be executed, Grim also revealed that the spies were to double as assassins, if called to do so, and would be paid a considerable bonus in that event. Grim, of course, claimed that he would have drawn the line there.

While Grim knew very little about the plans of the Venatori, Leliana suspected that, in addition to gathering intelligence, they planned to use the assassins to destabilize Thedas in the same way Corypheus had intended to use the Duchess to kill Céline and send Orlais into political chaos. Halviana no doubt thought she could improve upon his plan by having her assassins already imbedded in trusted proximity to key people across Thedas, so that the second she had Ahrue’s
power she could send out the order to destroy any serious rivals. No doubt even the archon had a killer in his midst, ready to deliver control of the Imperium to Halviana.

It was not enough information to truly eliminate the root of the threat (Grim had never heard the name Halviana, and knew nothing about the ritual of transference), but it gave them a starting place that would seem legitimate rather than paranoid when presented to the leaders of Thedas. Leliana and Josephine would have scouts and dignitaries deliver messages by hand to the most likely targets of the assassins, explaining the situation and naming the suspects, recommending quick and quiet eliminations of the spies. With any luck, the network would be cleanly dissolved without raising the Venatori suspicion or risking additional bloodshed.

However, as Leliana had feared, Grim’s information would be of no help to Ahrue. They still had no solid evidence against Halviana. They could only hope that their increased patrolling of the Dales and the most likely passage points to Tevinter would intercept her and her captures before she could be taken to the Magister. But judging from the reports from the field, the amount of blood suggested that Ahrue would bleed out long before they could bring her to Halviana. It was beyond unlikely that she still lived.

Leliana had just finished sending a messenger bird to a scout in Val Royeaux when a beautiful caramel and cream colored owl swooped into her rookery and landed on her desk. Leliana narrowed her eyes in puzzlement. Wild birds were usually put off by the scent of so many domesticated birds concentrated in her aviary. And she knew of no power in Thedas that used owls to deliver messages. But sure enough, as she inspected the owl, she noticed a roll of paper, sealed with silver wax, tied to the bird’s leg. She cautiously removed it while the bird preened himself.

She unrolled the letter and read the narrow elongated script.

_Inquisition representatives:

This is Solas writing. Your response to the Venatori threat has been insufficient. We were attacked by Venatori forces twice near Halamshiral. Ahrue was gravely injured in the first of the two attacks and very nearly did not survive. Chance and the fortuitous arrival of some allies saved us both from the second attack. We are safe, and the healer here tells me Ahrue should survive, as will our child, if it interests you to know. However, the concentration of Venatori forces in the northern region of the Dales has us virtually penned in. I regret I can provide no further detail as to our current location. If this missive is intercepted, I would prefer to not have Venatori and Red Templars storm our doorstep. Anything you can do to resolve this situation would be most appreciated.

Regards,

Solas_
Leliana was beset by a flood of conflicting emotions. Solas had managed to irritate, relieve, and worry her in the space of the first four sentences. Joy and frustration settled on her in equal measure. It was clear Solas was placing a share of the blame on the Inquisition for not managing the Venatori more effectively. And she’d expected that he was about to place the responsibility for Ahrue’s death on their heads when she was instead met with the very pleasing news that the Herald was safe, and her injuries were being tended to. Solas had not abandoned her after all, and, although he did not say so directly, it looked as though he’d had a hand in tending to her and getting her to safety after she was wounded. Leliana still didn’t understand or trust why they were together or why they were so far north of the ruins Ahrue had left to explore, but she was, for once, glad that Solas was by the Herald’s side.

The warm relief didn’t last long before Leliana’s mind turned to how this news might be used to the Inquisition’s advantage. It would be easy enough to play up Ahrue’s death as a way to get the Venatori to retreat from the Dales. An official announcement that the Inquisitor’s body had been found might inspire useful responses from allies and enemies alike. It would legitimate the Venatori threat, and as Thedas galvanized in mourning, rage, and fear at the loss of their Herald, the Archon would likely be more than willing to place all the blame on the head of Halviana in order to avoid a war the Imperium could not possibly win. If they could find evidence to connect Halviana to the Venatori, that is.

She chewed on the end of her quill as the plan started to stew. A good place to start would be to have Grim send a message to his Imperial contact to tell them that there is a rumor going around that the Herald was found dead south of Halamshiral. Then they could send some letters to Ahrue’s former comrades, informing them of her death. It would be cruel but was also necessary in creating a believable deception; if her death became common knowledge and her people seemed unmoved, it would raise suspicions. In a few days, the Inquisition would make the official statement that the Herald of Andraste had returned to the Maker’s side, and that the circumstances of her death were currently being investigated. This would buy them time while they continued to search for information on Halviana. Additionally, the Venatori, fearing retaliation and losing their purpose would undoubtedly retreat to Tevinter.

Many around Skyhold had already witnessed the tearful state of Cullen and Josephine, the rage of the Iron Bull, and Leliana’s stony silence. The rumors of what this behavior meant had already begun to circulate. No one in Skyhold would doubt it when it came to light that Lavellan was dead. Assuming Cullen could contain himself when Leliana told him of Solas’ letter. Josephine was trained as a bard and, despite the impression of innocent sincerity she radiated, was an adept liar. However, it might be best for Cullen to remain in seclusion for a few days to avoid tipping their hand.

She took a fresh piece of parchment from the stack on her right and licked the nib of her quill. In a few minutes she was attaching a letter for Ahrue and Solas to the owl’s leg, informing them of her plan and requesting frequent updates on Ahrue’s condition. She gave the bird a firm shove to urge him along. With a slight nip at her wrist, the owl set off to the northwest.
Bull leaned against the battlements looking over the mountains at the early rising sun. A new day, he thought to himself with a deep breath of the cold morning air. All the awful fucking shit of yesterday was still with him, would always be with him, but there was something comforting about the idea that days end and days begin. Leliana was probably done putting the screws to Grim by now. And maybe, just maybe, something useful would come out of all this crap, something they could move forward with. Something that would make it all a little easier.

Most of the Chargers were passed out drunk in the tavern by now. They’d tried to keep spirits up for his sake, but Bull could tell that they weren’t feeling it. When Rocky’s head had hit the table with a slurred moan, Bull had taken the opportunity to duck out and leave them all to their drunken dreams. Truth was, ever since he’d dragged Grim to his cell, he’d wanted to be alone. Alone he didn’t have to manage his body language or facial expressions; alone he could just look at a pretty sunrise feeling pissed off and sad that he’d lost two friends in a single day—one to the Venatori, the other to betrayal—and both were his fault.

The door to Cullen’s chambers creaked open, and Bull stifled the growl that hummed in his chest at having his brooding interrupted. His fingers tightened on the wall sending some of the aged masonry crumbling to the cliffs below. “Hey, boss,” he said, stripping the irritation from his voice.

Cullen came up beside him and leaned against the wall. “Bull,” he said with a nod. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked like hell. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday; I was not myself.”

Bull snorted. Poor guy was so buttoned up that a few drinks and bitter words had him feeling like the town drunkard. “Don’t worry about it, Boss. The Chargers put on much more of a show than you did last night. I think everyone needed to cut loose a bit after… yesterday.”

Cullen nodded. “It would seem so. I hear you found our spy. Thank you for that,” he said weakly.

Shame curdled in Bull’s stomach. “Don’t thank me, boss. I was too late to do her any damn good.” He absentmindedly pounded his fist against the wall, sending more stone work skittering down the wall of the keep.

Cullen’s nostrils flared and his irregular breathing told Bull he’d said the wrong words. “We all failed her,” he said hoarsely. “But it’s not over. We owe it to Ahrue to see every last Venatori hang.”
Iron Bull shook his head. “Hanging was never really her style.”

Cullen sighed. “No I suppose it wasn’t. She probably just put them to work doing research or scrubbing floors.”

“And probably make them personally apologize to every single person they pissed off,” Bull said with a grin.

Cullen chuckled. “She did have a strange idea of punishment. More like she was chastising children for stealing cookies before dinner than punishing treason.”

“And she had a sense of humor about it, too,” Bull added, recalling a certain duchess’ ‘community service.’ “Though, I always thought she could do with a little more humor in her life. I think I can count the number of times I saw her enjoying a good belly laugh on one hand.”

“I loved that about her,” Cullen said with a wistful sigh. “The rarity of her mirth made it all the more precious when it appeared.”


Cullen ran his fingers through his disheveled curls and smiled weakly. “It’s alright. I know I’m hopeless. She knew it too.” He rubbed the stubble on his jaw. “I wasn’t what she wanted.”

Bull pivoted so he was facing Cullen and leaning sideways against the battlement wall. “I don’t know if this will help or not, but I don’t think she was really what you wanted either.”

Cullen’s brow furrowed. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

Bull scratched underneath his chin. “I’m just not sure that the vision you had of her in your head really matches up with the real deal.” Bull could see Cullen tensing, and wondered if he was making things worse. “Look, Cullen, Ahrue was an admirable person and sexy as hell, but she wasn’t ever going to be a good fit with you. You wanted different things, valued different things. In the long run, it wouldn’t have worked out.”
Cullen gave Bull a tight irritated grin. “Is this really about Ahrue and me or are you just trying to reassure yourself that letting Dorian leave was the right thing to do.”

Bull pounded his fist to his heart and staggered back, smiling. “Ouch! You got me! Good one, Inquisitor.” He clapped Cullen on the back and draped his arm around the shorter man’s shoulders. “Yeah, maybe we’re both hopeless.”

Cullen slumped slightly under the weight of Bull’s arm. “You might be right,” he granted with a sigh. “In any case, it’s time to move on. Maybe for both of us.”

Bull gave him another rough whack on the shoulder, very nearly sending Cullen over the edge of the battlements. “That’s the spirit, boss!”

Cullen winced and his face clouded a bit as he recovered from Bull’s well-meaning blow. “It may take a while.”

“As it should. But in the meantime,” Bull said with a vicious grin as he tightened his fist in front of his face, “let the Dales run red with the blood of Vints as they fall beneath our hammer of vengeance!”

Cullen laughed in spite of himself. “That may help.”

“Glad to hear it,” Bull said brightly. He moved to give Cullen a friendly punch to the shoulder, but the man hopped out of the way before he could make contact.

Helping lift Cullen’s spirits had actually made Bull feel a little better himself. He was in the middle of a hearty laugh when he heard the door to Cullen’s office creak, and he turned to see Leliana and Josephine coming toward them. While Josephine looked perplexed and anxious, Leliana’s face was slightly flushed, and although her body and eyes were heavy with the signs of exhaustion, there was a slight bounce in her step that told Bull something good had happened. “Inquisitor,” she said in mock calm. “May I have a word?”

“Of course,” Cullen said, and the bare signs of levity fell away from him quickly.
Her eyes flited to Bull, and she considered him for a moment. “You may as well hear this also,” she said resignedly. “But what I am about to tell you cannot under any circumstances spread beyond the four of us.”
Ahrue slept for several days under the skilled ministrations of Ilaran, with Solas always close at hand. Though the old healer might have described his position more as “under foot” than “close at hand.” After a few days of tripping over Solas and bristling under his constant questions and fussing, Ilaran declared Ahrue well enough to be situated in her own quarters with frequent house-calls. Ahrue and Solas took up residence in a tent looking out over a lush garden. Solas hoped the scent of herbs giving the breeze a minty bite would be of some comfort to her while she slept. Ahrue was laid out on the ornately carved wooden bed, piled high with down pillows and fluffed blankets. Solas took a spot in a sufficiently comfortable chaise facing the bed as his place to sleep, but he spent most of his days and nights sitting in the chair by Ahrue’s side, reading from the various tomes he’d barrowed from the sanctuary’s modest library.

Periodically he looked up from the volume he was currently perusing and watch Ahrue. Every day, more color returned to her face, and her breath deepened and the strained rattling of her inhales lessened. And the more the signs of mortality faded from her, the more the tightness in Solas’ heart eased. She would be alright, and any day, any hour, her eyes would flutter open.

While Solas longed to see her awake and healthy, to be able to hear her voice, he dreaded the conversation ahead. He believed she would ultimately agree to Mythal’s terms, but he was certain she would feel little gratitude to the witch who had cornered her without recourse. Mythal had closed every option Solas had thought they might be able to exploit to their advantage. He could try to kill Mythal, but it was highly unlikely that he would succeed. Agreeing to her terms, on the other hand, would be a guarantee of freedom for Ahrue, as unpalatable as the cost of that freedom may be.

He watched her face, peaceful in slumber. He hated that he would again be the one to destroy that peace, to be the barer of more darkness to her life. But having Mythal deliver her terms in her cold, threatening, mockery was out of the question. His gentler touch may not affect the difficulty of the position forced upon Ahrue, but at least if it came from him she would not have to be doubly faced with her powerlessness as the witch goaded her.

The silken fabric of the tent rustled, and Solas turned to see Ilaran entering, arms loaded with a bundle of her trade tools. She gave Solas a crooked smile and a nod, which he mirrored with warmth. He knew she found him somewhat annoying, but he felt deep affection for this woman who had saved Ahrue’s life against all odds. She went about her business wordlessly, arranging her tools on the table on the opposite side of the bed from Solas so she was facing Ahrue’s back. She folded down the blankets and very gently removed the poultice from Ahrue’s wound. For once, the exposure of the injury to the air did not make Ahrue moan or pull away in her sleep. It struck him as a good sign. “How is she, hahren?” he asked.
She pinched her lips together and nodded. “The last of the curse has left her body. She should heal quickly now, with a little help.”

Solas took a deep releasing breath. He’d been waiting to hear those words for days.

“Now,” she said, rolling Ahrue onto her back. “Let’s have a look at baby.”

Solas grimaced. Ilaran had deemed these regular pre-natal examinations necessary to be sure the injuries Ahrue had sustained did not have any lasting effects on the fetus. But necessary or not, they cut him to the quick. The child he wanted but not enough. The life they’d created by the twisted whims of another. The mark of his beloved’s victimization at the hands of a cruel, selfish god. The promise of a future corrupted. That growing life embodied all his dashed hopes.

Ilaran rolled the blanket down further to expose Ahrue’s belly, and placed a folded sheet across her breasts. The healer palpated Ahrue’s abdomen, while her hands glowed lightly with a cool green aura. “Your child is thriving, Fen’haril. More than halfway along, I should say. And stronger every day.” She pressed her palm flat against Ahrue’s skin, and a grin spread across the older woman’s face. Solas suddenly found his hand caught in the healer’s strong grip, being pulled from his seat. “Feel,” she ordered him and pressed his hand to Ahrue’s belly.

He tried to pull away, fearing that his touch against her bare skin was intrusive, but Ilaran held him firmly. Then he felt it: a light flutter against his fingers. Solas’ desperation to pull away became suffocating. He wrenched his hand from Ilaran’s grip and backed away, ears pinking with anger and embarrassment. It was too much. The fact that the child moved changed nothing about the intractability of their position as imposed by Mythal. Wanting alone was not enough. Feeling was not enough.

The old woman chuckled. “It’s a baby not a wasps’ nest!” She shook her head. “You’re lucky she’s the one who has to carry the whelp; you certainly lack the constitution for it. Now take a seat before you swoon,” she said gruffly, snapping her fingers toward the chair.

Solas sat as directed and stared at the floor while Ilaran covered Ahrue again. The woman completed her task and put her hands on her hips. “Well, look who’s finally joined us!” Solas’ gaze snapped to Ahrue’s face. And his heart turned to wine as her bright eyes met his.

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The slight jostling of hands on her abdomen stirred Ahrue from her slumber. She opened her eyes to the motion of hazy figures and the thick sounds of muffled voices. Even in her barely conscious state and blurred senses she recognized Solas taking a seat beside her, and his presence served to give her a focal point around which the unfamiliar surroundings could take shape. She felt a blanket being tucked around her chest, and she blinked the fogginess from her eyes just as Solas looked to her face.

For a moment he looked tense, alarmed even, but his face quickly softened and a light smile turned his lips. The joy that lit his steel-blue eyes and the curve of his heart-shaped mouth made Ahrue’s skin hum warmly. It occurred to her that she’d missed him, and she wondered how long she’d been asleep.

“Vhenan,” he practically sighed the word, breath caressing the syllables. “How do you feel?”

“Groggy,” she said in a scratchy voice. She smiled, remembering the last conversation she’d had with him, the one she’d thought would be her last. “But not dead.”

He cradled her neck in his hand and stroked her jaw with his thumb. “And glad I am of it,” he said, his words soft as satin.

A second person cleared their throat. An old woman with Mythal’s vallaslin etched on her forehead stood cross-armed beside Ahrue. The Well’s whispers responded harmoniously to the woman’s presence, and Ahrue knew immediately that she was in the company of a Sentinel. Somehow, Solas had found them. Ahrue gaped in astonishment.

“Ahrue, allow me to introduce Ilaran,” said Solas. “She is a healer of the Sentinels. She saved your life. A feat for which I am eternally grateful.”

“Ma serannas, hahren,” Ahrue said, bowing her head. “I did not expect to wake up.”

Ilaran nodded sharply. “I had my doubts you’d pull through, but you fought for life every bit as hard as you fought the Shemlen who invaded our Temple.” Her expression softened and she took Ahrue’s hand in her own boney hands. “You saved many lives that day, Da’len. I’m glad to have played my part in returning the favor.” She jerked her head in Solas’ direction. “This one stayed by your side through it all. With every breath he thanks fate that you didn’t slip away from him. You can see it in his eyes the way he looks at you.”
Ahrue looked to Solas who was blushing sheepishly, but she could see it in his eyes just the same. She always could. From their very first meeting he’d watched her with astonished gratitude, and later with more love than she’d ever felt from a glance. He got love wrong as often as not, but the depth of his feeling couldn’t be doubted.

Ilaran cast Solas a disapproving gaze. “He might need some handholding with the impending arrival of your little one, though. He’s jumpy about it.” Ilaran patted Ahrue’s hand and smiled. “But the baby is healthy. And whether or not the Wolf is ready, you’ll be parents in a little over four months.”

Ahrue’s calm flickered at the mention of her child. She knew talk of the baby made Solas uncomfortable in the same way that it made her feel cold and empty. “Thank you,” she said unsteadily.

Ilaran looked between them and tutted. “You as well?” she asked incredulously. “You are a strange pair. In my day a child was a gift! But you two act as though it’s a terrifying beast that has burrowed its way into your womb, and you’re both skirting around it like you’re worried it might wake up and devour us all if acknowledged!”

Ahrue winced and Solas frowned. Ilaran’s joke had struck close to the truth, and they both squirmed a bit at her mention of it. “Our lives are complicated, hahren,” Solas said softly. “So, you can assume that a child would add to those complications, in ways that are not entirely desirable.”

To put it mildly, Ahrue thought. Solas took her hand and gave her a small smile that she took as an offer of comfort and support. As complicated and painful as her life was, he would be there with her, willing to entangle his life with hers, and bear the complications with her.

Ilaran rolled her eyes as she gathered an assortment of tools and herbs in a bundle off the bedside table. “I’ll leave you two alone to stare dreamily at one another.” She paused and a crooked smile turned her lips. “Ah to be young!” As she approached the exit of the tent, her expression became suddenly stern and she turned to Solas, an admonishing finger at the ready. “You be easy with her. Give her a day or two before any… exertions of any kind. Her lungs and heart are still mending. And I know how impatient you young folks can be.”

Ahrue and Solas shared a blush as the old woman left the tent. “She is… direct,” Ahrue said with a wincing grin.
“Indeed,” said Solas, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I suppose a few thousand year of life would make most people lose patience with dancing around an issue. Present company excluded,” she added with a grin.

Solas’ eyes darted to Ahrue’s face, but his tension relaxed as her expression clued him in on the fact that she was teasing. “I do enjoy dancing. Part of my youthful charm perhaps?” he asked, his eyes shining with his trademark impishness.

Ahrue wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

He laughed. “Ah well. I will endeavor to act my age.”

Ahrue smirked. “Maybe you can start by telling me how on earth you found the Sentinels.”

He tilted his head. “It would be more accurate to say that they found us.” Solas went on to describe their journey to Enansal’nan, the encounter with the Venatorri, and their rescue at the hands of the Sentinels. She suspected he was downplaying his own role in getting them to Enansal’nan, and she noticed the way his voice and hands shook as he recalled the story for her and the long pauses that were undoubtedly filled with his censored grief and fear. Her heart went out to him. If their places had been reversed it would have been agony for her to know his life was frozen on the brink like that. Whatever their struggles were, whatever pain still separated them, she loved him, and the thought of losing him, through his death or her own, was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Solas’ brow knit as he noticed her surfacing emotions. “Are you alright?”

She nodded quickly. “I’m just relieved that we’re both alive. You were right about what you said when the healer was tending me: we have been through far too much for it to have ended that way.”

Solas’ gaze fell and he frowned. “Fate was kind this time,” he said quietly.

She took a deep breath, remembering how much they had both said in what she’d thought were her last fragile minutes of life. Did their exchange of tender words and regret belong to the intensity of the moment or had her near death served as a catalyst to revelations that transcended the moment in which the words were uttered? She bit her lip, gathering her courage, needing to know. “You also
said that you should never have left me, that you should have told the truth instead.” Ahrue searched his face. “Did you mean that?”

A sad smile shaded his features. “I did. I don’t know how much it would have changed things for either of us. But even the chance of spending more time in your company would have been worth it. I should have realized it then. I should have been willing to risk more.”

A tear streaked his face, and Ahrue brushed it aside with the back of her index finger. “Damn right, you should have,” she said with a soft smile as validation and hope warmed her skin. He couldn’t undo the past or the pain he’d caused her, but his acknowledgment of his error brought them each a step closer to letting the past rest. He took her hand and kissed her fingers, but his face still looked so sad. “What is it?” she asked.

He avoided her eyes, staring at the edge of the blanket instead. “You said you loved me, just before you lost consciousness. Did you mean that?”

She sighed. “I never stopped loving you, Solas.” She snorted. “Sometimes I also hate you a bit. Sometimes more than a bit. But that always fades. The love doesn’t.”

Again that sad smile fell upon his lips and he met her eyes. He sighed. “There are some things we need to discuss, but I would prefer to wait until you’ve had a little more time to recover.”

She tensed. She could read him well enough to know that what he wanted to discuss was not good. “No. Tell me now.”

He nodded solemnly. “As you wish, Vhenan. It is about Mythal.”

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Ahrue sat in almost total silence while Solas relayed his conversation with Mythal. The truth of her lineage had little impact of Ahrue; hearing it felt like finding a sought after piece to complete the jigsaw image of a puzzle: it was satisfying, helped the picture of her life make more sense, but once it was in place, it ceased to be impressive. She was in fact relieved to know that her life was the design of Mythal instead of Fen’harel. One more barrier between her and Solas fell away, knowing that he had had no hand in her odd way of manipulating mana nor her arrival at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. He might have taken advantage of her talents when they met, but at least she was not his tool by design. It did not make her think too highly of Keeper Deshanna, however. What had
been Ahrue’s going rate that her clan would send her away at the behest of an old Shemlen witch?

The truth of Mythal’s role in the conception of their child made Ahrue’s skin crawl, but, that too, did not surprise her. She’d long ago surmised that her offspring was connected to the larger constellation of events in her life. Mythal’s confession to Solas confirmed it, and it was good to know the truth even as knowing made Ahrue feel ill. However, when Solas told her of Mythal’s proposition, Ahrue blanched and her pulse and breath quickened.

It was both too good and too horrible to be true. She could be free from the geas. All she had to do was surrender a child whose existence she’d been deeply conflicted about from the beginning. It was certainly a better outcome than what she’d expected since Solas had first voiced his suspicion that Mythal wanted the child. Despite his promise to do everything he could to prevent it from happening, Ahrue had remained certain that she would lose the child to Mythal and be held by the geas for the rest of her life. Mythal’s proposition offered another way. It was in her best interest to say yes and cut her losses. She and Solas could move on with their lives. She could forget.

But the tears that streamed down her face told her that she wouldn’t forget. The grief may lessen over time, her rationality may keep her from regretting the choice to let Mythal take the child, but she would never forget the pain of it: the pain of having her options closed off to her one by one; the pain of having her body used against her will; the suffocating pain of powerlessness; the pain of having her mistakes revisited upon her; and, yes, the pain of losing something that under different circumstances could have been a joy, a gift.

It didn’t matter whether she agreed to Mythal’s terms or not, the pain she felt carried over. If the child died, Mythal would torment Ahrue for the rest of her life; if Mythal was somehow prevented from taking the child, she would hold Ahrue and the child under the geas, and the same scenario would play out with the next generation. Her suffering would become a legacy, passed down her line, until Mythal had what she wanted. There was only one chance for her and the child to be free. “You’re sure you can’t kill her, Solas?” she asked unsteadily.

He sighed. “I will try, if that is your wish, but without you being able to assist me, my success is unlikely.” He frowned. “And if I failed, she would have you both.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I don’t want you to risk it.” She fidgeted, digging anxiously at her cuticles. “If I do this, I’ll be free and you won’t have to risk your life. If I don’t, I’ll lose everything: the chance of ever being free, the child… you. If that happened I…” she shuddered, feeling the pull of despair. “It would be too much for me.”

Solas looked at her with immeasurable sadness and stood up, shaking his head as he backed away from her. She was reminded of that expression he’d worn the night at the waterfall, and her stomach tightened. “Solas? What is it?” she asked, forcing her words into steadiness.
He closed his eyes, unable to look at her. “Vhenan, there is something I have kept from you,” he said sadly.

Ahrue’s nostrils flared. “Dirthara-ma, Solas! Are you kidding me? Do we have to keep doing this?”

He shook his head. “It is my last secret. My last lie.”

She sighed, choosing to feel the bitter grating of irritation over the fear that burned in the back of her thoughts. “Fine. Out with it then.”

He nodded and lowered himself slowly onto the edge of the bed, looking away from her. “The seal. The spell can only be renewed in the same fashion as before: with a soul. Someday it may fail again. There is no way to permanently seal the sanctum. It will always be vulnerable to corruption.”

A shiver ran through Ahrue. Still the Dread Wolf. She swallowed hard, trying not to feel. “You’ll have to sacrifice someone again, then? To keep the Creators from being corrupted like the Forgotten Ones were.”

He pivoted toward her. “Not exactly. I will use my own soul to renew the seal. I will be the sacrifice.”

Emotions that she could not feel spun nauseously in her gut. “Why?” she asked blandly. Her voice sounded unreal to her.

“I have few options. It must be an Elvhen soul that powers the seal, any other would not be able to harmonize with the magic of the seal.”

“What about the Sentinels?”

He shook his head. “The mistake was mine, vhenan; the price is mine to pay as well.”
“No,” she said numbly.

He looked at her with an eyebrow cocked. “No? ‘No’ to what?”

She noticed her hands were shaking. “I don’t know,” she said in mental fog.

He frowned. “It is not how I want it, but it’s the way it must be.”

She shook her rapidly. “No.”

“It is.”

Tears came unbidden to Ahrue’s eyes. “You’re saying you’re going to die?” her voice shook with a surfacing emotion she couldn’t describe.

He closed his eyes. “Yes.” He took a deep unsteady breath. “I don’t have any choice.”

Something in Ahrue snapped and she pushed Solas from the bed. He landed on the floor looking stunned but not hurt. She flew out of bed and crouched beside him, ignoring the pain that shot through her still-mending lungs. She took a handful of his shirt and pulled him toward her. “Don’t you dare talk to me about choice! *Fenedhis*!” she hissed, releasing him with a shove. “You can do what you want with your life and death, but don’t pretend that you are not choosing it.” She didn’t say the words that burned in her heart: *Don’t pretend that you aren’t choosing to abandon me, again.*

Solas’ jaw tightened. “You are right,” he said, voice laced with venom. “I could choose to sacrifice someone else. I could even choose to sacrifice you. I could choose to let the seal break and see what becomes of the world for it. Or I could choose to break it myself and personally usher in the corruption that will bring the blights or worse.”

“Are those really your only options?” she shouted, unbelieving. “With all your power, it comes to this? Die or seed destruction?” She stood up and walked away from him, fists clenched, hot tears streaking her face.
He stood too but kept his distance. “Ahrue,” he said, voice slow and heavy, “don’t you think that if there was another option, I would take it?”

“I think that you have spent too much time sleeping. You’ve forgotten how to be in the world. There was a time when you led a rebellion that made the gods tremble. You stopped wars with words and guile. You built heaven.” She shook her head. “And then you gave up. You went to sleep. And you’re still giving up. You lie, you walk away, you hide, and you’ll die.” She gave him a tired withering glare. “Don’t expect me to be impressed with the nobility of it.”

“I take it you won’t agree to Mythal’s proposition then?” he asked with no small amount of bitterness. “It would be too much like giving up?”

She snorted. “Don’t confuse our positions, Solas. You are not chained; I am. I will agree to her proposition, because it is my only chance to cut my chains. Making this agreement is me choosing to live and thrive. You’re choosing death. You can tell Mythal I’m writing the contract now.”

He opened a chest on the ground near him and pulled out a roll of parchment, ink, and a quill. “I hope you will understand one day,” he said, handing her the supplies.

“Please go,” she said, voice quivering in rage and grief.

He nodded solemnly and left.

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Ahrue spread out the writing supplies on the table, and sat in the wooden chair in front of it. This small amount of power Mythal would grant her: she could decide the wording that would both haunt and free her. It was a power that Ahrue would make full use of. She nibbled her fingernails, staring at the void of the blank page. Every word must be carefully chosen to fulfill Mythal’s expectations and Ahrue’s needs: a hole that would go unnoticed, a window slightly ajar. Mythal seemed to know Ahrue’s actions and perhaps her senses as well (how else would she know when to tug on her leash?), but it was not yet apparent if she knew her thoughts. This would be the test.

Ahrue knew from her studies of Tevinter magic how to create a magically binding contract. It was a form of blood magic that made it physically impossible for the signers to stray from the terms of the agreement. She nodded as the words came to her and swirled her hand over the inkwell, enchanting the ink with the spell that would make the contract binding. She dipped her quill into
the glowing red ink, and put nib to paper:

I, Solas, Fen’haril, Fen’harel, Fenaril, swear in blood that I will do no harm to the child of Ahrue’garastu, neither before, during, nor after its birth, neither directly nor indirectly, neither before, during, nor after it is possessed, nor will my magic be used in any way (directly or indirectly) that will interfere with the passage of Mythal, Flemeth, Asha’belannar into the child of Ahrue’garastu.

I, Mythal, Flemeth, Asha’belannar, swear in blood that upon the birth of the child of Ahrue’garastu, the geas that binds Ahrue’garastu will be lifted, and she will be granted the right to retain the knowledge of Vir’abelasan for all her days. I will do no harm to her nor control her in any sense, neither directly nor indirectly, for all my days. After she is freed from the geas, and my path parts from Ahrue’garastu, I will never encounter her again in any form nor take any direct or indirect action in her life.

We, Solas, Fen’haril, Fen’harel, Fenaril and Mythal, Flemeth, Asha’belannar, agree that the child will be possessed by Mythal, Flemeth, Asha’belannar, before its birth and after the seal on the Sanctum is restored. The possession will take place in the Outer Sanctum. If labor quickens before this point, Solas, Fen’haril, Fen’harel, Fenaril will immediately place Ahrue’garastu in stasis to be delivered to Mythal, Flemeth, Asha’belannar at the agreed upon location of the Outer Sanctum.

Beneath the terms, both Mythal and Solas would press a pricked finger to the parchment, and thus be bound.

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Ahrue’s stomach turned as she walked up the crystal steps to where Mythal waited for them. She clutched the enchanted contract in her hand, and repeatedly reminded herself to loosen her grip to avoid tearing the paper.

“You are doing the right thing,” said Solas’ beside her, voice soft and encouraging.

She nodded. Of that she had no doubt, what remained in question was whether or not it would work. “Would you cast a calming aura on me, please?” she asked Solas shakily. “I’m afraid I might faint.” In reality she was afraid that Mythal would be alerted by any show of anxiety.
Solas frowned. “Of course, vhenan.” He cast his spell, and Ahrue felt her heart and breath slow, her muscles relax.

She smiled gratefully at him. “You’re still calling me ‘vhenan,’ even after that earful I gave you yesterday?”

“Yes,” he said simply.

She decided not to push him further. Clearly he had not changed his position and she would not change hers.

They entered Mythal’s chambers where the witch was waiting for them, smiling broadly by a window. “Ah! My dear Wolf and his vibrant Storm,” she said with barbed warmth. “It is nice to see you have recovered, girl. Our wolf was practically beside himself with worry.”

Ahrue scowled, not liking the way Mythal spoke possessively of Solas, nor the way she spoke down to Ahrue. “Quit it with the niceties, Mythal. I’m here for one thing: to buy my freedom from you. I have no interest in playing this game.”

Mythal smirked. “You two share an impatience for the social graces, it seems. I find good manners are always worth the small effort they require. But, as you wish, we can go right to the heart of things.” She sauntered toward Ahrue, leaving just a few inches between them. “Solas tells me you wanted to write the contract yourself.”

Ahrue smiled thinly. “I just want to make sure my interests are adequately attended to in this pissing match of yours. The agreement may be between you two but it does primarily concern me.”

Mythal nodded. “I would expect nothing less. But you will pardon me if I ask to inspect it before signing anything.”

“A fine,” Ahrue snapped, handing her the contract.

Mythal began by turning the scroll over in her hands, while a violet cloud of magic twisted around it. Mythal smiled. “Nicely crafted spell, child. You continue to impress me.” She unfurled the scroll and read the contents. She chuckled. “I suppose I should be hurt that you are so careful to see yourself rid of me for good, but I do admire a good show of self-preservation.”
“You will sign, then?” Solas asked brusquely.

“I will.”

The aura of calming kept Ahrue’s feelings in check. “Good. Now please be done with it already.”

Solas held out a dagger to Mythal for her to use to prick her finger for the signing.

Mythal laughed deeply. “A poisoned blade! Fen’harel, I thought you better than that.”

Solas shrugged and grinned wickedly. “Base of me, I know. I’m sure you can forgive me for taking this final opportunity to move against you before I sign over the life of my child.”

“I would have been disappointed if you hadn’t tried,” Mythal said dryly.

Solas returned the poisoned blade to his belt and pricked his finger on the sharp edge of his wolf-jaw pendant while Mythal removed her gauntlet and pricked her finger on a dragon brooch she wore. Each simultaneously pressed their bleeding fingers to the paper. As soon as their blood made contact with the parchment, the glowing red of the enchanted ink lifted from the paper and twined and constricted around their wrists before sinking into their skin. The parchment fell to ground. It was now a simple paper with some writing on it; the true contract was now a part of their blood and souls.

Ahrue bent to pick up the paper while Solas still stared murderously at Mythal. Ahrue grabbed him by the arm. “Let’s go. We’re done here.”

He hesitantly obeyed, and without another word, they left Mythal to gloat over her victory in private.

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Ahrue and Solas walked down the winding steps together in silence. When they reached the
bottom, a Sentinel, who identified himself as Edris, approached Solas saying something about a letter. While Solas was busy with Edis, Ahrue took the opportunity to find some time for herself. She walked the grounds of Enansal’nan, politely greeting anyone who crossed her path but moved on quickly to preserve her solitude. She walked to the far side of the three great trees, and found a stone dais with silver arboreal arches crossing diagonally and across, creating something of a branch-like lattice-work dome over the structure. As Ahrue moved closer, she saw that the dome housed an Eluvian. She approached it and felt it humming with magic the way the one Morrigan had brought to Skyhold did. The glass was intact, and for a moment she felt the urge to jump through.

“There you are,” Solas said behind her.

She didn’t turn, but she could hear his footfalls approaching her, and soon he had a hand on her shoulder. It was a small comfort, but a comfort just the same.

“How are you,” he asked, his voice cautious and gentle.

She didn’t know the answer. Her careful word choice in the contract had gone unnoticed. A small victory, but one that would more likely than not come to nothing. She could not tell Solas of her small deception, because as soon as they spoke of it freely, Mythal would know. And Ahrue suspected her vengeance would be unpleasant for both of them. So Ahrue depended on Solas to discover the slight opening her words left them on his own. If he never found it, everything could proceed as Mythal had planned: she would take the child, and Ahrue would be free. If, on the other hand, Solas found that word, that one word, that contained all Ahrue’s hope and power, there would be a possibility for action. It didn’t guarantee success. They could act and fail, or he could find the opening and deem it too risky to try. But there was a chance.

Ahrue couldn’t say any of this, so she just shook her head and said, “I hope we did the right thing.”

He brought his hand to her cheek and turned her to him. “We did,” he said with deeply felt sincerity. Ahrue envied him. Certainty was easier than hope, even when the certainty pointed you toward death and pain. At least with certainty you knew. Hope, on the other hand, carried with it the constant terror of its probable loss. It offered no peace and promised nothing. Solas had certainty: he was certain that Ahrue would be free, that Mythal would take the child, and that he would die. He could find strength in that certainty. But Ahrue was burdened with the hope opened up by that one word. She might lose the child; she might not. She might be freed from the geas; she might not. She might lose Solas; she might not. It was too much. She shook from the weight of it.

Ahrue leaned against Solas’ shoulder, trying to capture some of his strength for herself, and he wrapped his arm around her, caressing her hip. For a long while they stayed in that position, staring into the mirror, each deep in their own thoughts. Ahrue missed this, the easy closeness between
him, the silence that had a comforting intimacy to it, the feel of his heartbeat against her ear, the smell and warmth of him reminding her of huddling around a campfire. Despite everything, he still felt like home to her. But because he had given up, because he had decided to take the comfort of certainty over the terrifying instability of hope, she would lose him. And the thought crushed her.

He must have felt the way her body shook with silent sobs, because he hugged her to him closer and tighter, and kissed her hair. “I’ve already lost too much, Solas,” she said through ragged breaths. “My clan, my parents, friends… myself. You once. I can’t bear losing more. With everything we’ve been through…”

He sighed. “If it is too much for you, perhaps it would be better to not allow things to go any further between us. The prospect of there being no future for us may be easier to accept if we…” his voice trailed off, and he held her a little tighter.

“Is that what you want?”

“No,” he said emphatically. “But, it may make what’s ahead less painful.”

“No it wouldn’t. The feelings don’t just go away because we’re not touching. They don’t even go away when we’re apart. Surely if the past few months have taught you anything it would be that.”

He chuckled softly through his nose. “You are right. So what do you wish to do?”

She lifted her head and turned to face him, his arm still around her. She pressed a hand to his chest. “I want to hold on. I want to hold on to every moment and refuse to believe that it might be our last. I want to refuse to believe that you’ll die in the sanctum. I want to refuse to believe that Mythal will take our child.”

Something like pity soured his features as he caressed her face and smoothed a tear from her cheek. “Vhenan, it is set in stone.”

She shook her head rapidly, a tearful smile defying him. “I don’t care. I can’t live braced for loss, not after everything I’ve been through. Everything we’ve been through. I can’t do it anymore.”

He nodded sadly. “You need hope.”
“Fuck hope. I need *defiance* in the face of certainty. I need you to hold onto me and *know* that it will be forever because anything else is unthinkable. I need us to make promises to each other that we can’t possibly keep. I need us to plan for the future with the reckless optimism of two people who can’t even imagine that the future won’t come.”

The sadness on Solas’ face was slowly displaced by that look of adoring astonishment he reserved just for her. Without a word, he brought one hand to the back of her neck while the other drew her pelvis close to his. The heat and hardness of his body made the entire world fade away while he explored the softness of her. Her body ached for him, and she moaned softly just as his lips embraced her own, and the sound of her wanting was lost in their fervid kiss.

Chapter End Notes

I may have listened to “Total Eclipse of the Heart” a bunch of times to inspire the mood of the last section of this chapter. I’ve decided that this song perfectly captures the Ahrue/Solas romance. :-)

Solas didn’t get much sleep that night. Not because he couldn’t—sleeping was as easy and natural as breathing to him—but because he didn’t want to miss a second feeling her—real, significant, impossible—in his arms, the weight of her head on his chest, the warmth of her breath against his skin. He knew what they had was fragile, in more ways than one, and if things fell apart, he wanted to look back knowing that he hadn’t taken a single moment for granted.

Ahrue’s speech the night before had perplexed him. At first he’d thought that she was in denial concerning the gravity of what was ahead—of which he could hardly blame her for—but as he’d looked into her desperate eyes begging him, not only to let her believe, but to believe along with her, to refuse to accept the inevitability of the inevitable, he began to sense that she meant something more.

The weight she had placed on the word “defiance” spoke to a very old part of him, the young man he’d been: Fenaril. In his youth he had refused to accept the unassailable power of the Uth’elgar’vhen. Despite their superior power, again and again, he’d found ways to sway them to do his will, or he’d sabotage their plans. True, he’d failed often, but not always. He’d succeeded more times than he could remember, even when failure seemed certain. When had he lost that part of himself, the part willing to reject the possibility of failure? Ahrue had accused him of giving up, and the more he thought on it the more he realized there was some justice in her judgment. He’d thought that he’d gained the wisdom to see when his actions could affect an outcome and when defeat was inevitable. He’d thought he’d learned when to fight and when to walk away. Now he wondered if his cynicism had made him too quick to judge a scenario as unwinnable.

Had Ahrue told him a year ago that he gave up too easily, he would have chalked her perception up to her youthful naivety and ignored her. But she had a way of changing anything and anyone she touched, and the longer he knew her, the more he found his fatalism flagging. She consistently proved his grim outlook wrong, and he’d come to believe in her ability to defy even the most staggering odds. After all, he’d been on the cusp of leaving the Inquisition and running from the Breach when Ahrue had appeared, alive and wielding a power that should have killed her. How many times had he advised the necessity of retreat only to have Ahrue go against his advice and win? But with Ahrue bound by the geas, it wasn’t her odds-defying talents they were depending on, it was his. And now that the contract was signed, his actions were bound as well. At least as far as the child was concerned. But maybe he could find a way to restore the seal without the necessity of a soul being sacrificed. Maybe he could live.

Perhaps if he, like Ahrue, refused to accept self-sacrifice as an option, he would be able to imagine other possibilities. He might find a way to live, and that certainly had its appeal. Solas held Ahrue a little closer at the thought of it. He wanted a future with her, to wake up with her every morning just like this. To stand by her side and see what she would shape the world into—because he knew that with or without the Inquisition at her beck and call, she was a force of incredible vision and power. She could rebuild the Dalish. She could use the power of the Well and her own connection to the old ways to bind the wounds sustained from millennia of human colonialism and war to help
the People find what they were meant to be. It is what he had always imagined her doing. Or she could focus her energies on the Sentinels and finding a place for them in this time and into the future. Whatever she chose to do, he wanted to be there to witness it and to help where he could. If she would have him. If he could survive restoring the seal.

Ahrue took a long deep inhale and a slow exhale, signaling to Solas that she was waking up. He rubbed her back as she arched her spine and stretched her neck. “Good morning,” he said.

She tilted her face up toward him and smiled before giving him a quick kiss. It was reassuring to him that she was showing relaxed affection this morning. Part of him had wondered if the night before had been more about passion and pain than love. But that warm smile and soft kiss assured him that her heart was with him. “Good morning,” she said, sleep blurring the edges of her consonants and softening her eyelids.

He ran his fingers through her disheveled hair. “How did you sleep?”

She broke eye contact briefly and the muscles of her jaw twitched. “Alright.”

She’d slept soundly, but Solas had felt the nightmares pulling at her during the night. He’d let the dreams run their course without interference; with everything she’d been through, everything that was ahead, nightmares were a way for her to confront and process those emotions and trauma.

“How about you?” she asked him, tracing the line of his clavicle with her index finger.

He chuckled. “I hardly slept,” he said as he stroked her jaw with his thumb. “It was one of those rare nights when the charms of the fade could not possibly compare with the appeal of the waking world.”

She smirked and cocked an eyebrow. “So you just watched me sleeping all night? And you weren’t bored senseless.”

“I had a lot to consider.”

“I was just a pleasant backdrop to the stewing of your mind, then?”
He laughed and kissed her forehead. “You were the focus of my every thought, ma’arlath.”

Ahrue sat up and stretched, the blankets falling from her naked chest. “Anything you care to share?” she said more seriously.

“Hmm?” he said with an impish grin. “My apologies, I seem to have found myself suddenly and inexplicably distracted. What were we speaking of?” She snorted and climbed out of bed. Much to Solas’ disappointment she began to get dressed. With an expressive sigh that made Ahrue laugh, Solas too began to dress.

“Shall we head out today?” she asked as she slipped on a new tunic the Sentinels had provided her. “We have about a two day journey to the docks, provided we don’t run into any more Venatori. From there we can hopefully get safe passage to Kirkwall.”

“Ah!” Solas exclaimed. “With all the… excitement I neglected to tell you: I’ve been in correspondence with Leliana. She has an inventive solution to our Venatori problem.”

“I hope it involves putting lots of sharp things in their fleshy bits,” she said wryly as she picked up her leather shoe from where Solas had thrown it the night before.

Solas felt his own rage at the Venatori spark in sympathy with hers. “Alas, no. The Inquisition has made a formal announcement that you are dead. They hope the Venatori will respond by retreating from Orlais. And indeed, her last missive reported that there has been a marked decrease in sightings of Venatori agents since the news of your death became widespread.”

An odd expression tightened Ahrue’s mouth and eyes. “Good then. Though it might be challenging to keep the hoax going once we leave here, especially if we travel through heavily populated areas. Best we avoid Halamshiral and approach the docks from the west. And we should avoid passenger liners. Maybe stow away on a cargo ship instead. Also Kirkwall may be a problem.”

“I suspect once we leave Orlais fewer people will be able to recognize you by sight. However, if we encounter Varric and Hawke in Kirkwall, we will have to impress upon them the importance of complete discretion.”

Ahrue winced. “My friends think I’m dead?”
Solas nodded. “It was important for the success of the plan that those closest to you display sincere emotional responses to your death. I believe the Iron Bull and the Inquisition leadership are the only ones of your inner circle who know the truth of it.”

She pinched her lips together and her eyes became distant, undoubtedly thinking of the way her friends would react to the news. Solas had given the matter some thought himself. Varric and Dorian stood out as the two who would be hit the hardest by the news, however Solas suspected many tears were being shed for Ahrue across Thedas. He sympathized with them. In their position, the news of Ahrue’s death would have undone him completely.

“We should be sure to meet Varric and Hawke some place private to avoid a scene,” she said a little sadly.

“That is wise. When we dock in Kirkwall, I will go on ahead and arrange a meeting away from the public eye.”

Ahrue grimaced. “That… may still draw unwanted attention; I’m not sure how Varric will respond to you. After the way you disappeared…”

Solas smiled ruefully. “Does Varric resent me as well?”

Ahrue shrugged. “Last we met he was more neutral on the subject of you. But if he thinks I’m dead, his opinions may have shifted. Further, he may assume you haven’t heard the news yet.”

“Ah, yes,” Solas said, imagining the kind-hearted, emotionally awkward dwarf trying to find the words to tell him about Ahrue’s fate and that of their unborn child. “We could enlist a messenger to arrange a private meeting.”

“Hmm. Maybe, but with his colorful history with the merchant’s guild and the Carta, we can’t be sure he’d agree to meet without knowing who he was meeting, and if he did agree, you can bet he’d bring backup.”

Solas sighed. “True. We need not come to any decisions now. It will be several days, perhaps more, before we arrive in Kirkwall. The more pressing concern is getting to Kirkwall without being recognized or encountering whatever Venatori remain in Orlais.”
Ahrue rubbed the back of her neck and furrowed her brow in concentration. “A change in attire perhaps.”

He nodded; the elegantly crafted armor she wore marked her immediately as an important person, especially considering the rarity of ever seeing an elf armored so richly. While her face may not trigger recognition immediately, the way she outfitted and carried herself made people look twice and recognize what may have initially escaped their notice. Fortunately, Solas was an expert at escaping notice, passing as the harmless hermit to avoid the attentions of the Templars. “We should leave Dirtharavas behind as well,” he said.

Ahrue pouted. “She’s been a great help so far. I’d rather take her along.”

Solas was still sore at the halla for tossing them in their most recent encounter with the Venatori, but his reasoning went beyond resentment. “A halla is an oddity that will mark you immediately as Dalish and draw attention. She will be quite content remaining in the Sentinels’ herd.”

Ahrue bobbed her head reluctantly and then drew her fingers across her forehead. “My vallaslin. I’d prefer not to…”

The difficult memory was dredged to the surface in a nauseous knot. “Stop,” he said and then blushed remembering that he’d spoken the same word to halt her the last time she’d defended the vallaslin to him. You are prefect just as you are. “Covering the marks with a hood or scarf will suffice.”

“Good.” Ahrue avoided his gaze, and Solas knew the memory of the waterfall was playing behind her sad eyes. An unhealed wound between them that still bled.

Solas walked to her side and took her hands in his own, winning him a melancholy smile. “Ahrue, that night did not proceed as I had intended it,” he said, knowing she would recognize immediate what night he was speaking of. He took a deep breath, gathering his courage. “I had intended to ask you to accept me as your bondmate.”

Ahrue’s eyes widened briefly as his unexpected confession hit her and then narrowed into a consternated frown. “Lost your nerve?”

“Yes,” he said in a low voice. “You deserved the truth, and until I was prepared to tell you everything, I could not ask you to bind yourself to me.”
She smiled thinly. “Well thank you for that, I guess,” she said sardonically.

“I should have told you the truth then. I convinced myself that I was doing you a kindness, but I was wrong. If I could change what I did, I would.”

“I believe you, Solas, I do,” she said heavily. “But you can’t change it.” She fixed him with her intense stormy eyes that both threatened and caressed. “You can, however, make sure you don’t repeat your mistakes.”

He nodded solemnly. Solas knew she was referring both to his tendency to dissemble and his newly acknowledged habit of giving up (or being realistic and bowing to inevitability, as he preferred to think of it). It was clear to him that Ahrue saw his plan to sacrifice himself in order to restore the Sanctum’s seal as no different from abandoning her as he had months ago. He wanted to promise that he would never leave her again, that he would never lie, but until he could find another solution to restore the seal, such a promise would be meaningless.

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Ilaran packed Ahrue’s rucksack with various salves, potions, and bandages, while Ahrue fussed with the belt of the traveling robes the healer had found for her in storage. The fabric of the robes was soft and delicately woven, while not being too showy. She felt awkward about the changes in her body as she tried to decide if the garment would be better belted low on her hips or at her ribs.

Ilaran fastened the sack and cast a sidelong glance at Ahrue. “The plainest robe in the world won’t do a thing for you as long as you’re carrying that around,” she said, nodding her head toward where Ahrue’s staff was leaned against the taut wall of the tent.

Ahrue bit her lip. Ilaran was right. Her staff was probably more recognizable as belonging to the Inquisitor than her own face was. Dorian had told her once that a merchant in Orlais was selling replicas allegedly signed by the Herald of Andraste herself. But no one would mistake her expertly crafted weapon as a cheap imitation. She would have to leave it behind with her armor. “Do you know if there are any staffs in storage?”

Ilaran reached for her own staff and thrust it into Ahrue’s hands. “Take it, Da’len. It doesn’t look like much but in the hands of one such as you, it will give even the mightiest dragon pause.”
“I appreciate the gesture, hahren, but I can’t take your staff.”

Ilaran rolled her eyes. “What use do I have for it in a place like this? I don’t go scouting like the young ones do, and all the magic I need for my spells is right here,” she said, wriggling her fingers while mint-green mana haloed her hands.

“Ma serannas, Ilaran,” Ahrue said, smiling warmly. The staff was cool to the touch and the ironbark was smooth as marble. It was finely crafted but simple enough in appearance that it would not draw attention to her.

Solas peeked into the tent. “Are you ready?”

Ahrue sighed and nodded. Ilaran handed her the bag she had packed and smiled. Ahrue shouldered the pack and Ilaran drew her in for a hug. “You will be back, Da’len,” she said, giving Ahrue a kiss on the cheek. “You belong with us.” She released Ahrue from the hug and bent slightly to rub her stomach, a gesture that made Ahrue stiffen despite the welcome familiarity it expressed. “And I want to meet this little one! We all do.” She straightened up and smiled sadly, pressing her hand to Ahrue’s cheek. “You, all three of you, mean more to us than you could know.”

Ahrue furrowed her brow, not sure exactly what Ilaran meant, but also feeling as though the sentiment was mutual. She was at ease with the Sentinels even though she’d only spent a few conscious days in their company. What’s more, she could picture Enansal’nan being her home. The voices of the Vir’abelasan were calm and melodious here, and the surfacing memories and knowledge of the Well were less jarring. It had been days after she’d woken before she’d noticed that she’d been speaking fluent ancient Elvish with the Sentinels since their arrival, a dialect she’d only heard from Solas now and then and had previously understood it only in its similarity to more contemporary dialects. With more time in Enansal’nan, she was sure she could come to fully understand and master the Vir’abelasan, and the Sentinels could help her do it. “I’ll miss you, hahren,” she said. “And I promise I’ll come back as soon as I’m able.” They hugged once more, and Ahrue left the tent with Solas.

Outside Abelas waited for them. Ahrue had had little opportunity to spend time with the Sentinels’ leader, but in their few interactions he had been warm, welcoming, and genuinely concerned for her wellbeing. “Lethallin, lethallan!” he said brightly. “I am sorry to see you leave us. I’d hoped to convince you to stay.”

Ahrue shook her head. “Ir abelas, Abelas. Our quest cannot wait.”

“So your mate has told me,” he said, giving her shoulder a squeeze.
“We will return if we are able,” Solas said.

“See that you do! You are one of us now, and that bond is for life.”

“Ma serannas, lethallin,” said Solas, and Ahrue echoed him.

Abelas bowed his head. “Dareth shiral, lethallin la lethallan,” he said before hugging them both in parting.

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The two day journey to the Waking Sea passed without incident. Ahrue felt much more at ease traveling with Solas now, and she enjoyed listening to him pass the time telling stories about his youthful adventures with his rebels and encounters with spirits in the fade. But mostly they spent the journey in quiet company, each lost in their own thoughts. She tried to think of some way to clue Solas in on her careful wording in the contract, but every idea she had, if put into practice, would risk giving Mythal the same chance to recognize the loophole. There was also the frustrating fact that if Solas figured it out, he would not be able to tell her as much, or, again, Mythal would know. She’d tucked the contract in his bag, hoping that he might feel moved to reread it and discover the wording himself. But so far he had not so much as unfurled the paper.

What she wouldn’t give to have Cole here, seeing through her and giving Solas exactly the cryptic hints necessary for him to recognize what she needed him to do. Of course with Cole there was always the possibility of him sharing what he sensed at precisely the wrong moment. Even so, his unusual way of speaking could evade Mythal’s understanding. But Ahrue had no idea where Cole was or if he had returned to the fade rather than remain in the physical world. So went her thoughts: always curling back on themselves in defeat; dead end after dead end. She’d almost be glad for a few Red Templars, just for the break in the obsessive spinning of her mind.

When they finally reached the rundown port town of Fadineau the sun had set and the docks were mostly deserted. The overwhelming smell of fish made Ahrue’s stomach churn. A single dock hand was swabbing fish guts from the nearby pier. Ahrue adjusted the red scarf that concealed her forehead from view and approached the young human man. “Excuse me, young man, may I have a moment of your time?” she called to him.

The boy lifted his head from his work and smiled, leaning on the mop he was using. “Course, always have time for a pretty lady.”
Solas sighed next to her while Ahrue gritted her teeth in a cloying smile. “We’re looking for a cargo ship heading to Kirkwall. Do you know which of these ships are bound there and where I might find their captains?”

He tilted his head and scratched his ear. “I don’t have the ship manifests. You’ll have to talk to the dock master come morning for that. Or you could go into the Tavern round the corner. Probably find sailors from most of the ships in there, and you can ask around.” His relaxed expression faded suddenly as he glanced about before leaning in close to her ear. “You be careful, though. Not everyone hereabouts is on the up and up. And some of them only see women when they dock. A sweet elven lass like you… some may try to take advantage.”

Ahrue stifled a laugh. She’d never been called sweet in her life. But at least it was clear he had no idea who she was if he thought a few drunken pirates would give her any trouble.

“Thank you for your concern,” Solas said putting a hand on Ahrue’s shoulder. “We will be cautious.”

“Just the same,” the young man said, wrinkling his nose, “better keep a close eye on your lady. The bun in her oven won’t turn them off any. If you turn your back, she might find herself in a bad spot.”

Ahrue noticed the corners of Solas’ mouth twitching in barely controlled mirth, no doubt contrasting the damsel this boy supposed her to be with the fierce and deadly person he knew. He cleared his throat to conceal a chuckle. “I will… keep that in mind.”

“Thank you for your help,” Ahrue said, squeezing out the last bit of sweetness she owned into those words and a parting smile.

Ahrue and Solas walked toward the light and sounds of the nearby tavern. “Apparently your brilliant disguise is a resounding success!” Solas said with a wry grin. “You looked quite the helpless lass to him.”

“I think a middle ground between damsel and leader of nations would be preferable,” she said. “If we look too helpless, we’re inviting a different kind of trouble.”

“Hmm,” he said, looking her up and down. “You may be correct. What do you suggest?”
“A garish scar?” she said with a shrug. “A necklace made of Shemlen bones? A robe soaked in the blood of my enemies?”

Solas laughed. “That is your middle ground? I was expecting more along the lines of a mabari companion, or a blade at your hip.”

“What would be intimidating about that?” she scoffed.

“Most people aren’t you.”

She held out her hand. “Then give me that nasty looking dagger you’ve been carrying.”

He hesitated. “I had Ilaran break the curse on it. It is an ordinary blade now.”

“Good,” she said. “I’d rather not kill someone with a little nick. Now give it here. If we get in a scuffle I can use it instead of magic.”

He held out the hilt to her but his face was still twisted in skepticism. “Do you know how to use this? If someone disarms you in a fight…”

“Ha!” she barked. “Are you joking? I’m Dalish. We’re all trained in bows and daggers from the time we’re children. And you’ve seen me use a spectral blade; I know the techniques of melee combat!”

His expression relaxed. “Of course. My apologies.” She took the blade from him and slipped it in her belt. “But do try not to get into a confrontation. For my piece of mind if nothing else.”

“It’s not like I go looking for trouble, Solas.” She laughed remembering what Varric had said to her once. “I have divine bad luck!” she said, giving voice to the memory, an observation that had turned out to be truer than she had supposed..

Solas gave her a withering look. “Indeed.” He gestured toward the tavern door. “Shall we then?”
She nodded and led the way. The moment they set foot inside the raucous tavern, an ale bottle soared between their heads and out the door to shatter wetly on the ground behind them.

“Is that the best you can do, Ryder?” said a human woman with her back to them to a heavy set man who had apparently been aiming for her when he’d thrown the bottle Ahrue’s way. “We agreed on forty, and that’s what you’re going to pay, no matter how much you wave your sad little bottle about.”

“The merchandise is branded! It ain’t worth shite, you cunt, and you know it!” Ryder shouted.

“Not my problem,” said the woman firmly. “You picked the target, and I delivered. You can dump the cargo in the sea for all I care, but you will pay me.”

Ryder forced a laugh and leaned back in his chair. “I’m not paying you a red cent. And there ain’t nothing you can do about it. One word from me and your ship’ll be impounded and your entire crew rounded up and thrown in a cell to rot; I have every guard in Fadineau in my pocket.”

The woman grinned devilishly. “Oh? And here I thought you were just happy to see me.”

Ryder stood up and leaned in close to the woman. He sucked his teeth. “You need to be taught a lesson in respect, whore.”

As he spoke, a second man circled soundlessly behind the woman, clutching a blackjack. In an instant Ahrue swung out her staff, catching the man behind the ankles and taking him to the ground. The room became suddenly quiet as everyone turned to look at the man on his back. The woman flashed Ahrue an excited smile before quickly turning and punching Ryder in the face. Blood spurted from his nose and mouth and he fell backward with a groan, breaking the chair behind him as he landed heavily. Meanwhile more than half the people in the tavern had gotten to their feet and held several people, including the man Ahrue had taken down, at knife point.

The woman unsheathed an elegant dagger from a scabbard affixed to her back and brought it to Ryder’s throat. She tutted. “Poor, sweet, Ryder. Did you actually think you were in charge here? Isn’t that just the cutest thing,” she crooned, pinching his cheek roughly. “But it isn’t the guards who run Fadineau, Silly. It’s the merchants and sailors. And who do you suppose has their loyalty? Some two bit crime lord who doesn’t pay his debts and inflates costs to line his own pockets? Or the admiral of the Waking Sea who keeps trade and commerce afloat, always pays her debts, and isn’t afraid to stick it to a prick or two?”
She dug the dagger in a little deeper and Ryder shouted. “Wait, wait! Stop! You’re right! We agreed on forty. I’ll pay forty.” He smiled nervously and very slowly reached for a money pouch at his hip. One of the woman’s allies took the pouch and counted the contents. He nodded at her, and the woman backed off of Ryder.

“You’re done here, Ryder. Next time I see you in Fadineau I’ll keelhaul you personally.” She looked to the crowd of sailors as she sheathed her dagger. “Boys, see Ryder and his friends out.” Her people obeyed and escorted the men out of the tavern with a few shoves and jeers, while the others resumed happily drinking.

The woman now turned to Ahrue and looked her up and down. “Well aren’t you just ripe enough to eat,” she said as she swaggered up to Ahrue. “Thank you for the help. You’re an absolute peach.”

Ahrue couldn’t help but be drawn in by the affectionate charm of the woman. She reminded her of Dorian: that perfect blend of confidence, sensuality, wit, and venom, paired with a surprising genuineness. “He was fighting dirty,” Ahrue said with a shrug. “If I’d realized half the people in here had your back, I probably would have stayed out of it.”

The woman waved for them to follow her. “Let me buy you a round,” she said with a wink. Ahrue and Solas joined her at a table near the back of the tavern. The woman leaned forward on her elbows considering Ahrue. “Now what brings you to Fadineau, Peach? You don’t look like a sailor, a merchant, or a local.”

“We were hoping to find passage to Kirkwall,” said Ahrue.

The woman’s eyes widened. “Kirkwall?”

“That’s right. Do you know who I could talk to about buying passage?”

“Fadineau doesn’t service passenger ships. You’ll want to continue east to the docks north of Halamshiral.”

“We don’t want a passenger ship,” said Solas simply.
The woman looked at Solas and narrowed her eyes. “Well aren’t you mysterious. I take it this isn’t a family outing, then,” she said knowingly. “What exactly are you smuggling to Kirkwall, and what’s my cut if I take you?”

Ahrue gave her an incredulous smile. “We only just met! Why would I tell you anything?”

“Listen, Peach, you don’t want to travel with any of this lot. You’re nothing but tits and ass to them. Travel with me, and I’ll make sure no one bothers you except in ways you’d like to be bothered.” She shrugged. “Besides, I have friends in Kirkwall who can see to it that you get top coin for whatever tasty thing you’re smuggling.”

“We have considerable finances at our disposal,” said Solas calmly. “You will be compensated for your troubles.”

“That’s grand,” said the woman with a twinkle in her eye, “but I don’t transport anything unless I know what it is first. Learned that lesson the hard way.”

Suddenly the pieces in her mind slid into place, and Ahrue’s expression brightened with recognition. “What is your name?”

“Did we skip introductions? I’m Isabella,” she said with a bow, “Admiral Isabella, Queen of the Waking Sea, and Captain of the Siren’s Call II.”

“Isabella?” Solas said incredulously.

Isabella sighed. “I know, I know. Yes, that Isabella. And no I don’t do autographs.”

It seemed Ahrue had divine good luck for once. “Isabella,” Ahrue said in a low voice. “I believe we have a friend in common.”


“We know them both actually. We just spent a year in the Inquisition with Varric, and we got to
know Hawke when she helped us get a handle on an army of demons and a fortress full of confused Grey Wardens.”

“You’re with the Inquisition?” Isabella said wryly.

Ahrue pulled off the cuff that concealed her left palm and rested her forearm on Isabella’s thigh. She channeled just enough magic through the mark, to open the thin green scar and cast Isabella’s astonished face in a green glow.

Isabella quickly clapped her hand over the mark. “Are you mad? You can’t go flashing that in a room full of mercenaries and pirates!” She leaned in close and whispered, “You’re the Herald? Everyone thinks you’re dead. Do you have any idea how much the Venatori would pay to get their hands on you?”

Ahrue nodded. “I have an inkling. Now will you help us get to Kirkwall? The Inquisition would pay you for helping me.”

Isabella sighed and shook her head. “Dammit, Isabella, what mess have you stepped in this time?” she mumbled. “You realize that if my men found out who you were, they’d mutiny and turn you in for the bounty.”

“We are aware of that risk,” said Solas gravely.

Isabella laughed. “‘We’re aware of the risk,’ he says. Like we’re talking about betting a gold on a gimpy nug in a nug race. I could lose my bloody ship.”

Ahrue frowned. “I’m sorry we’re asking this of you. But we don’t have a lot of options. You can lock us in a cabin, or we’ll stow away in a crate. We’ll play along with any lie you want to tell your crew. But please help us.”

Isabella closed her eyes. “Oh balls,” she muttered under her breath. She threw her hands in the air. “Fine! I’ll take you. But only because I can’t stand the way Hawke looks when she’s disappointed in me.” She stood up. “Meet me at the west end of the pier just before dawn. I’ve got to figure out what kind of fish story to tell my crew.”
Dorian was slumped forward on the bar, his body limp except for his fingers tightly gripping the handle of the half full tankard of ale. It wasn’t his usual drink of choice, but it was cheap, and it reminded him of the brew served in The Herald’s Rest and thus of absent friends. They were dispersed now, spread to every corner of Thedas. But Dorian liked to imagine that, though distance parted them, they were all joined at that moment in a state of drunken grief. Blackwall would no doubt be brooding in a shadowed corner of some tavern, staring into the dark pool of ale at the bottom of a pint, saying nothing, but sighing heavily now and then. Bull, on the other hand, was probably leading the Chargers in some raucous, drunken song to honor the Herald’s unparalleled strength and shapely ass. Varric, likewise, would be surrounded by friends and locals in Kirkwall buying him drinks and clinging to his every word as he regaled those assembled with story after story of how the Herald had saved the world. Sera would be getting up to tipsy mischief in honor of “Quisy’s” memory, no doubt. Even Viviane was likely sipping some expensive vintage in the solitude of her imperial suite, perhaps while penning letters of condolence to the Inquisition.

“You know what I love about alcohol?” Dorian mumbled to no one in particular, his eyes closed and his cheek resting against the bar’s cool surface. “It is so very versatile! Whatever you need, it is happy to provide: courage, jubilance, comradery, lust, some hazy fun, or any degree of numbness that one might require.” He lifted his torso and planted his forearms on the bar, leaning forward to make eye contact with the bartender. “True, it exacts a penalty for its services. But ultimately, it’s a price most of us would gladly pay.” Dorian drained the rest of his drink and pushed a coin toward the bartender before holding out his tankard for a refill.

Dorian narrowed his eyes and gave Althea a thin smile. “I’m sorry, did I stumble into a Chantry by mistake? I’d assumed from the surroundings that this was tavern, an establishment which generally operates on the model of customers paying proprietors in exchange for libations. But based on your unsolicited advocation for the virtues of moderation I can only assume that you are either a very poor bartender or this is an immensely misleading design for a Chantry.”

Althea rolled her eyes and poured him the drink. “You should be nicer to me,” she said dryly. “I’m just about the only one willing to put up with you, night after night.”

Dorian scoffed. “My dearest friend is dead at the hands of my countrymen. I believe I’m entitled to some ill-tempered grousing and as much drink as I please.”

Althea frowned and nodded. “I won’t cut you off, Dorian. I just don’t want to find you face down and stiff in a gutter.”
Dorian smiled weakly. “You’re an angel to care, Althea, and to put up with me. But right now, a little self-destruction is exactly what I need.” He took a deep draft of his ale and grimaced at the hoppy sting of it on the back of his tongue.

Althea leaned forward. “And what good will you slowly pickling your liver do your dead friend?”

Shame or ale roiled in Dorian’s stomach. “None at all.” He raised his mug in a toast. “I drink in the service of justice! With every organ of mine I obliterate with cheap ale, the celestial scales of crime and punishment move nearer a point of balance.” He drank.

“You’re not making a lick of sense,” Althea said wiping the counter with a soiled rag.

“Of course I’m not,” Dorian grumbled, wishing he could occasionally find himself in the company of educated people who would catch the grace and aptness of his literary references. Like pearls before swine. “In plain terms: I am partly to blame for my friend’s death, so I’m punishing myself, as I’m the only responsible party who is ready at hand.” Again he drank, fancying that the bitter ale was exactly what guilt would taste like, if guilt had a flavor.

Althea shook her head. “You can’t blame yourself for what the Venatori did, D.”

Dorian grinned. “Oh can’t I?” Over the past few days he’d become an expert at finding inventive ways of blaming himself for Ahrue’s death. He’d supported her decision to leave the Inquisition, he’d even been an advocate of her choice to go alone. He’d talked Bull out of his plan to go ahead of her with the Chargers to clear the path and the Graves of any trouble before Ahrue arrived. He’d personally chosen not to follow her and had in fact intentionally selected a route to the coast that would not pass through the Graves, in what he’d fancied was a show of respecting her choices. And while one of his few friends in the whole blasted world was being hunted and killed, he’d meanwhile been leisurely gathering information on Halviana, the workings of the Venatori, and the current political leanings of the Magisterium, all to no avail. And to top it off, it was his people who’d done the deed. Another bloody Vint. It could even have been someone Dorian knew: a cherished childhood friend, perhaps. Dorian took another swig of ale, thinking that it was time to move to stronger stuff, something that really burned as it went down.

Althea sneered. “Funny how self-punishment and self-pity look about the same from this side of the bar.”

“Ho ho!” Dorian guffawed in mock merriment. Cruel, but honestly, the distinction between
punishment and pity had blurred from where he sat as well. “Now who needs to be reminded to play nice?”

Althea opened her mouth to speak when something caught her eye at the far end of the tavern. Dorian turned. A sullen looking elven girl entered the room. She looked to be no more than thirteen years old. She wore a cropped red cloak and cowl. Twin daggers hung at her hips.

“Sorry, kid,” Althea called out. “No children allowed. If you’re hungry, you can try the alley behind Vernis’ place. His cook sometimes puts scraps out back.”

She walked toward them shaking her head. “I ain’t here for food or coin. I’m here for him,” she said, nodding in Dorian’s direction.

“Me?” said Dorian, taken aback.

She jerked her head in the direction of a corner table. Dorian gave Althea a bemused shrug and followed the girl to her table, drink in hand. Once seated the girl smiled broadly, and the youthful luster of her mahogany skin and the cherubic fullness of her cheeks made Dorian think she may well be closer to ten than thirteen years. But there was a wicked glint in her eyes that made him uneasy. However old she was, this girl was not to be taken lightly.

She looked him up and down. “I’ve been watching you. I don’t usually bother with rich farts,” she said simply. “But a friend of a friend says you’re an alright sort, even if you’re a bit sparkly and talk like a right prick.”

Dorian snorted. “Well if there is one group that holds me in high esteem, it’s friends of friends. I must look much more palatable at a distance.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that there is a perfect example of talking like a right prick. Pffft. Talking like you’re carving each word in marble. Waste of everyone’s time, that is. Talk plain or I’m leaving.”

“My apologies,” he said with a nostalgic grin. She reminded him of Sera, from the distaste for pretension right down to the obviously self-cut hair. “Since it’s clear you already know who I am, would you mind giving me your name?”
“Don’t need my name. Far as you and me are concerned I’m a ‘friend,’” she winked on the word ‘friend,’ and Dorian realized she may have a great deal in common with Sera indeed.

“I see,” he said. “And would this friend of a friend who told you I’m ‘an alright sort’ go by the name ‘Jenny.’”

The girl smiled. “Look at you, smarty pants. Put it all together with a word and a wink.”

“I’m not just a pretty face, my dear,” he said wryly. “Now what can I do for you?”

She frowned. “The Jennies heard what happened to the Herald. One of the good one’s she was.”

Dorian looked down at the candle that burned between them. “She was at that.” And the world would never be the same for having lost her. “What of it?”

“Our friend of a friend says it was some puffed shirt magister who did her in.”

“Not directly, but yes, a magister did command the people who killed Ahrue. The responsible party is named Halviana.”

The Jenny narrowed her eyes. “Don’t seem right: Herald is dead and the bitch who killed her is still breathing. And she don’t stop there. Lately, her pointy-headed creepers been rounding up little people. And once you get grabbed by the pointies, nobody sees you again. Something ought to be done about that.”

Dorian cocked an eyebrow. The Venatori were abducting the downtrodden and killing them in blood magic rituals, no doubt. “That is a shame, but if you fancy remedying this inequity yourself, I would advise against it; Halviana is very well protected. And as I’m sure you know, her people would not balk at killing a child if it suited them.”

She shrugged. “Not planning on getting stabby, if that’s what you mean.” The Jenny leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Maybe nobody big cares if the pointies are taking little people. No skin off your neck if some cellar maid goes missing, right? But maybe they mess up some time and take someone who’s not so little.”
Dorian perked up. “Are you saying the Venatori abducted someone from the upper classes?”

She nodded. “Old friend of yours, from what I hear. Stuffed shirt named Rilienus.”

Dorian blanched. He had indeed known Rilienus. They’d been close before Dorian had left to join the Inquisition. Rilienus shared some of Dorian’s proclivities, and thus they found themselves frequenting similar establishments and developing what Dorian fancied was a mutual infatuation with one another. However, while Dorian had rejected his own parents plans to see him married to a young woman of appropriate social standing, Rilienus had dutifully done as he was told. That had not stopped him from continuing his patronage of the seedy brothels and taverns that served as meeting places and havens in Minrathous for men who preferred the company of men. But when Dorian had seen Rilienus at courtly affairs with his new wife, although he held up the pretense nicely, Dorian could tell that inside he was positively screaming from the agony of living a lie. And now that beautiful, tender-hearted man was a victim of the Venatori. “Do you… know how it happened?” Dorian stammered.

She nodded. “He was slumming it in a brothel nearby. Got drunk. Pointies picked him up on his way home.”

It made sense. The nobles who visited such places usually dressed in low attire to avoid being recognized by anyone consequential. He had apparently passed as a drunken peasant too effectively that night, and the Venatori hadn’t realized who they had until it was too late. “How do you know they took him? Maybe he just had enough of his sham of a marriage and ran away.”

“He’s not the only one they took from there. Each night someone from there goes missing. Pointies think they’re doing a service to the community by taking their lot. One of ours knew Rilienus from there, knew who he really was, not the fake name he puts in the books. Well, when he stopped coming back and his servants started asking all quiet-like if he’d been seen around town, we put the pieces together.”

Dorian felt ill. “I… I need some air.” He quickly excused himself and stumbled out the back door of the tavern. He was still retching when the Jenny came up behind him and rubbed his back.

“Sorry about your friend,” she said softly. “It’s bad what they’re doing. But it’s useful that we know, yeah? Your people with the Inquisition, they can stop it.”

Dorian trembled, staring at the mostly fluid contents of his stomach now flowing lazily down the slope of the street gutter. “It will be difficult to prove without… a body.” He retched dryly. “But it’s something to go on. Rilienus’ father is a powerful man and a political enemy of the Archon.
The Archon will thus be motivated to act.”

The Jenny twisted her face in a knot of confusion. “Won’t him being an enemy make the Archon not want to help?”

Dorian chuckled. “On the contrary. Rilienus’ little secret will bring shame to his family if revealed. The Archon will be motivated to act precisely because it will hurt a powerful political adversary. All we’ll need is a way to connect Halviana to the Venatori.”

She smiled. “Easy as lying! Except not lying because it’s the truth. We know where the Venatori take the people they nab. A warehouse by the docks. People go in; bodies go out and into the drink. Thing is, that warehouse has an underground passage that goes up to Halvi’s cellar. Her servants used to use the passage to smuggle food and stuff out of her place to them what needs it, so we know it’s there. Now it’s warded so only she can go in and out.”

“Excellent. The Inquisition can use this to put some pressure on the Archon to come down hard on Halviana and the Venatori. And the upperclasses won’t take kindly to hearing that Halviana has the gull to bleed nobles, whatever their proclivities.”

She thumped him heartily on the back. “So it’s good then, even though it’s rotten.”

Dorian nodded and managed a smile as he put a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Quite. You helped a great deal, my dear. Thank you for trusting me with this.”

“You’re an alright sort. Even if you put too much wax in your mustache.” She gave him a little salute and skipped off.

Dorian took a deep breath of the night air and instantly regretted it as the smell of bile hit him. He couldn’t bring back Ahrue or Rilienus, but he could make good on his promise to make his homeland a better place. Ridding Tevinter of Halviana and the Venatori was a good start. His hands grew cold as ice formed on his fingertips. He hoped the Archon showed no mercy. But first things first: he needed to get a message to the Inquisition. What came next would be up to them.
The pitch of the sea bothered Ahrue less on this trip than it had during her original trip across when she’d travelled to Ferelden to spy on the Conclave. Maybe the waters were just calmer this time around, or maybe she was. At the time of her original voyage, the sea had seemed a metaphor for the world of unknown danger she was entering into. She’d felt powerless cooped up behind some crates as a storm crashed and the waters sloshed outside, knowing that her magic and ingenuity could do little to prevent the ship from sinking. Now she was well acquainted with both the unknown and powerlessness, and some choppy water seemed a small thing in comparison to a breach in the sky and Mythal’s choke hold on her life. Further, with the way her magic had developed, it seemed entirely possible that she could prevent a ship from sinking, fight off water dragons, pirates, or anything else the universe threw at her. And this time she was not alone.

She was also not a stowaway, which gave her additional comfort and security. Isabella had told her crew that Ahrue and Solas were former mercenaries to whom she owed more than a few favors. She was giving them passage to Kirkwall in exchange for a lead on an easy and profitable mark. In reality the lead would be provided by Leliana. It was enough to make the crew of the Siren’s Call tolerate their presence without too many follow up questions. Isabella had also been kind enough to share her Captain’s quarters with them. It kept them out of the crew’s way and gave Ahrue and Solace somewhere comfortable to pass the voyage. Isabella was usually on deck, so they had privacy for most of the three-day voyage.

When she showed them to her quarters on the first day, Isabella gave them a… thematic tour of the room: “The dresser is old, but it’s sturdy. Hmm, it might be a bit tall for you two, though. The table there… It’s a good height, but it can’t take both your weight at the same time, maybe if… if you stand, and you… oh yes, that would be nice. Now with the floor… It’s a bit rough. You may want to use the rug, just pull it over to wherever you want it. If I had a copper for every splinter I’ve pulled out of my back and ass and knees and… You get the idea. Of course if that’s your thing, tweezers are in the bottom drawer of the nightstand. Oh, and there’s always the bed. Took out the headboard so it wouldn’t keep the boys in the barracks awake when it hits the shared wall.”

Isabella smiled as she gave the bed a good shake and seemed to momentarily lose herself in thought. With a slight shudder she shook off whatever memory had distracted her, and she returned her attention to her dumbfounded guests. She swaggered toward them, biting her bottom lip. “And if you’d like a more… personal tour later, you just let me know, Peach,” she said with a wink and left the room.

“I believe her motives in providing us such generous accommodations may not be entirely honorable,” said Solas wryly once the door was closed.

Ahrue smiled. “Based on the way Varric talks about her, I think that is just her idea of being a good host. She’s rather sweet in her own odd way, though.”
Solas looked around the room frozen in place as though he was afraid of touching anything. Even his exposed toes curled in to reduce the surface area of the floor he was in direct physical contact with. “Hmm.”

“Relax, Solas. The room is clean and there will be no personal tours,” Ahrue said as she took a seat on the edge of the bed.

“Relieved to hear it,” he said, sitting stiffly in the chair by the table. He looked out the porthole window as the boat rocked with the raising of the anchor.

Ahrue laid back on the surprisingly comfortable bed and closed her eyes. These accommodations were definitely superior to stowing away behind some crate and subsisting on dried fruit and nuts for a week, barely moving for fear of being caught. But then, what did pirates eat? Hopefully not fish, or oatmeal, or any of those heavy bland stews that Fereldens fancied. Her stomach churned at the thought, and a groan escaped her lips.

“Are you unwell, Vhenan?” Solas asked.

“I’m fine, just not relishing the thought of this trip.”

“Is going back difficult for you?”

Ahrue opened her eyes to see Solas looking at her with knit brow. “Going back? To the Free Marches?”

He nodded. “We will be a relatively close distance from your kin. A four-day journey from Kirkwall, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ahrue stiffened. “Clan Sabrae is in the opposite direction. Kirkwall is as close as we will get to clan Lavellan.”

His gaze fell. “If that is your wish.”

“It is,” she snapped.
“Very well.” She could sense the disapproval behind his soft and cautious tone, and it bristled her.

“Don’t patronize me, please,” she said, voice charged.

His eyes widened. “I did not mean to…”

She held up a hand. “Yes you did. You think you know better than me; you think I’ll regret not seeing my clan. But you’re wrong. You don’t know anything about it.”

His jaw and shoulders tightened. “I know what it means to lose people, my heart. I would not wish that pain on you.”

The irony of his words made her fingers heat with ready rage. She folded her arms and shook her head. “Well that is rich. I haven’t questioned whether or not you were right to lock your kin up in the fade; I’d thank you to not question me on this. Sometimes losing people is better than having them in your life.”

“Better for whom?” he said sharply. “You or them?”

“Both!” She could still feel the bilious taste of shame when she recalled Despair’s dream: the hot words of her grandfather and Keeper as they accused her of being a harellan. “And I could ask you the same question, Fen’harel,” she added bitterly.

“True. Which is exactly why you should try to profit from my insight on the matter. For good or ill, they are your people; they are a part of you. I would not see you lose that connection if I could prevent it.”

“Why are you invested in this?” she said, sitting up and pressing her hands to her eyes to ward of the mounting headache. “You don’t like the Dalish, and the Dalish really don’t like you.”

He sighed. “You could do what I never could: teach the Dalish what they were meant to be. You could offer a path forward that honors the past, that recovers what should never have been lost, while moving forward.”
His words touched a buried part of her heart. There was a time not so long ago when she had wanted exactly that. But much had changed: the Vir’abelasan, her pregnancy, and Solas. She flared her nostrils and drummed her fingertips on the soft bedding on either side of her. “They wouldn’t listen to me any more than they would listen to you.”

“You underestimate the effect you have on people, m’ar lath,” he said with great intensity. “Nations raised you higher than any elf has been elevated since the fall of Arlathan. You command respect and deference wherever you go. If Shemlen can see you as their leader, their savior, surely your own people would do no less.”

Ahrue wrapped her arms around her chest. “I appreciate the faith you have in me, Solas. But I was a convenient symbol for the Inquisition, nothing more. Anyone with the anchor would have inspired the same deference. And the sway I have over humans will only decrease my credibility and status among my clan. You also underestimate the impact this will have on my reputation,” she added, pressing a hand to her belly. “When I was a child, a young woman was disowned by the clan for becoming pregnant by a human merchant who used to buy crafts from us. They would do the same to me.”

“Her child would have been human. Ours is elvhen. You truly believe this distinction will not matter to your people?”

“To them, you are a flat-ear. And they feel no more kinship with flat-ears than the Sentinel’s feel for the Dalish. But yes, if they believed you were just another elf, it would make a difference for the child. They would gladly raise any elf-blooded baby to be Dalish. It would not however make any difference for me. Whether I slept with a human, a flat ear, or the Dread Wolf, I would be branded a kin traitor. Some clans may forgive such indiscretions. Mine would not.”

He exhaled heavily, and Ahrue could see the anger tightening his muscles. “How can such people have created a person like you? Never once have you shown me disrespect for not being Dalish. Nor are you one to cling mindlessly to customs that serve no purpose.”

“Not everyone in the clan is like that. Some have come from other clans that have less strict beliefs. My mother was from another clan, as was my father’s mother. And, from what I’ve been told, clan Lavellan was not always so conservative. But over the years, the Shemlen have become increasingly aggressive. We lose people almost yearly to bandit attacks or at the hands of traders who thought to steal our wares. To make things worse, sometimes there are elves with the Shemlen bandits. They kill us just as readily as their human brethren. We’ve learned to distrust anyone who is not of the People.”
He frowned. “I… can understand that. But surely your kin would recognize that you are no threat, regardless of whom you have loved.”

She wasn’t sure that they would. More than that, she wasn’t sure whether or not she was a threat. Regardless of whether their ways were actually faithful to Elvhen culture or not, they were still their ways. Trying to change them, however well intentioned, seemed cruel. She recalled how much it cut into her every time she learned that a story she’d grown up hearing was false or that a ritual she’d valued was perverted by time or human influence. If she told her grandfather that Elgar’nan was a tyrant and Fen’harel the hero of the downtrodden, that the stories he had devoted his life to preserving and interpreting were little more than propaganda and slander, how could he possibly respond? Anger? Devastation? Denial? His entire life’s work and cultural identity were a lie. It had been difficult for Ahrue to learn the truth, and she had always been one to question and doubt. People like her grandfather would never recover from the truth. It would be an act of violence to tell them.

She didn’t notice Solas crossing the room to sit beside her, and he took her by surprise when he put his hand tenderly on her back. “You are not a threat to your people, vhenan,” he said, intuiting the meaning of her prolonged silence. “And you were wrong when you said that anyone could have accomplished what you did for the Inquisition. You have a rare and marvelous spirit, and I am not the only one who sees that. Once you are free from the geas, the world will be yours to build according to your vision.”

She laughed. “That sounds extreme.”

“I do not believe so. I only hope I am fortunate enough to be by your side to witness it.”

She put her head on his shoulder, enjoying the hard steadiness of the bone against her temple. “So do I.”

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When the Siren’s Call II pulled into Kirkwall’s dock it was late in the night. Isabella came bursting into the room, looking even more excitable than usual, jolting Ahrue and Solas from their deep sleep. “Look alive, my sweets! We’re in Kirkwall.”

They sat up rubbing the sleep from their eyes. “Perhaps we should wait until morning to disembark,” Solas grumbled.
“Nonsense!” Isabella said brightly, pulling the blankets from the bed. “Varric and Hawke are both night owls, and I’m sure they’ll want to know that you’re not dead as soon as possible. Though I can’t promise they’ll be too happy to learn that you had them on. I’ll take you to Hawke’s place so you can have a nice private reunion.”

They gathered their gear and set out following Isabella. Kirkwall was less run down than the last time Ahrue had passed through. Lowtown especially showed a marked difference. The repairs to the more affluent districts had been prioritized after the fateful battle between Kirkwall’s mages and Templars, while the poorer districts had been neglected. Now it seemed all the rubble had been cleared, and most buildings appeared to be occupied. They passed by a tavern that had been boarded up and sporting a “condemned” sign the last time Ahrue had seen it. Now light shone through its windows and door, and shouts and laughter spilled out into the streets. “Best rat-flavored whiskey in the Thedas right there,” said Isabella with a grin as they walked by. “But keep your wits about you if you stop for a drink; the local drunks get handsy once they’ve had a few.”

While Lowtown was bustling with activity despite the late hour, the streets of Hightown were all but deserted, save for a few folks stumbling out of a door underneath a sign that read “The Blooming Rose.” Isabella pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the door. “Jethann is hands down the best in the business. Tell him Isabella sent you and I’ll get a discount on my next visit.”

Ahrue shot Solas a confused look while he wrinkled his nose distastefully and said, “I think not.”

Isabella shrugged. “Suit yourself, but I’m telling you, you’re missing out. And you might even learn a thing or two.”

In a short walk from The Blooming Rose, the group found themselves in front of a tall green door that Ahrue could only assume belonged to Hawke. Isabella tested the doorknob without knocking. When she found it locked she reached into her thigh high left boot and pulled out a lock pick. She squatted in front of the door and set about jimmying the lock.

“Um, sorry, are we being dragged into a burglary here?” Ahrue asked.

Isabella laughed. “No, Peach. Don’t you worry. This is Hawke’s place. I’m simply doing her the favor of demonstrating that her locks are absolute…” the lock clicked open… “rubbish!” Isabella pushed the door open and held it as she waved them through.

From inside they heard a woman’s voice call out: “Am I being burgled again, or is that Isabella at my door?” Hawke stepped into the entryway smiling broadly. Then she recognized Ahrue. Her smile was replaced by an expression of shock. “Maker! How are you…”
Isabella closed the door behind her. “What is it, Hawke? You don’t like the present I brought you?”

“I… uh…” she laughed breathily.

“What’s the hold up?” Varric’s voice called distantly from another room. “Tell Rivani to get in here! I’m in the middle of a great story!”

Hawke gave Ahrue a sad smile. “He’s been telling us all about your adventures,” she said softly and winced. “He thinks you’re dead. Everyone thinks you’re dead.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Another low male voice, just out of Ahrue’s sight, spoke: “Hawke? Is everything all right.”

Hawke looked in the direction of the voice. “Yes, Fenris. Everything is fine… just… complicated.”

Fenris stepped to Hawke’s side, a large mabari at his heels. Ahrue was taken aback by the ethereal beauty of the strange elf. She could sense the lyrium in his bright white tattoos and imagined that they must burn terribly. “Isabella,” he said in a suspicious tone, his body tensed for trouble. “Who are your friends?”

Before Isabella could answer, Hawke put a hand on Fenris’ arm and he relaxed some. “Perhaps we should take this in the other room.”

Ahrue took a deep breath and nodded. They followed Hawke into a small library and up to the seating area on the second floor where Varric was seated jotting down marginalia in a book.

“Varric,” Hawke said softly. “You have some guests.”

“Just a second,” he said without looking up. “Had an idea I needed to put to paper. Finishing a sentence, and… done!” he set the book down on the end table by his seat and looked up at Ahrue.
He went ghostly pale and his mouth fell open. “Well… shit,” he mumbled. He slowly stood, keeping his eyes on Ahrue.

“Alright, Varric?” Hawke asked cautiously.

“Uh… I don’t know what I’m supposed to think here,” Varric said, a slight squeak in his deep voice. “Are we talking undead, possessed, or is it really you?”

Ahrue’s skin heated with shame. “It’s me.”

“Did you know you’re supposed to be dead?” he asked, still looking at Ahrue like he expected her to burst into flames at any second.

“The deception was not her doing,” said Solas, stepping into the lamp light.

Varric looked at him and snorted. “And you brought Chuckles along!” he said with insincere enthusiasm. “Great! Now could someone tell me what the hell is going on?”

The group sat down while Solas explained their trouble with the Venatori, Ahrue’s near death, their rescue by the Sentinels, and the Inquisition’s decision to fake Ahrue’s death.”

Varric shook his head. “Red’s character will be getting a heavy rewrite in the next draft of my book,” he grumbled. “I’m thinking warts and hammertoes.”

Ahrue kneeled in front of him and took his hands in hers. “Varric, I am so sorry. I feel terrible about this.”

Varric shrugged but his expression softened as he looked at her. “What can you do? You weren’t exactly in a position to object. What I really want to know is why you’re hanging around with Chuckles here again. I mean, I’m glad that he got you to the Sentinels and all, but you do remember that he walked out on you and the nugget a few months back, right?”

Isabella whistled. “Lucky I didn’t know about that, or I would have made him walk the plank.”
Ahrue looked to Solas who fidgeted in his seat. “I remember,” she said.

“And…” Varric prompted.

“And it’s complicated.”

“Right… So because it’s complicated you let him off the hook. And everything is fine.”

“Everything is not fine,” she said firmly. “But he knows he fucked up, and he’s trying to make it right. But that’s between him and me, and I don’t need you to be angry on my behalf.” Her words were harsh but she kept her voice warm. She knew Varric meant well and that he hadn’t had time to process everything yet, so she did her best to curb her irritation at his meddling.

“Fair enough, I’d just hate to see your forgiving nature get you hurt… again,” he said glaring at Solas.

“I’ll be careful,” she said, knowing she really wasn’t being careful at all, and that she had good reason to expect considerably more hurt in the near future.

“You’ll have to excuse Varric,” Hawke said with a smile. “He’s very protective of his friends’ hearts. He once warned me not to get involved with Fenris because he was a crazy ‘angsty porcupine.’”

“He what?” Fenris said straightening up.

“Whoa now, Hawke,” Varric said, raising his hands in surrender. “You’re going to get me in trouble. I believe I said he dressed like an angsty porcupine. And you were the one who said ‘crazy.’”

Fenris crossed his arms. “Oh that’s much better. Maybe you should mind your own business, Dwarf.”
“Seriously?” said Varric with a chuckle. “You’re mad at me for something I said, what, _five… six years_ ago? Clearly Hawke wasn’t swayed.”

“Lucky for you,” Fenris grumbled.

Solas, clearly grateful for Hawke’s generous diversion of the conversation, turned to the couple. “You have been together for quite some time, then.”

Hawke smiled at Fenris. “Yes. We had our rough spots in the beginning, but we’ve been firmly together for about four years now.”

“Indeed? Do you have any children?”

“No children,” Hawke said. “I’m complete rubbish with anything small and breakable.”

Fenris chuckled. “Besides, Hawke has a habit of adopting every misfit that crosses her path,” he said with great affection to his smirking paramour. He then looked to Ahrue and Solas and grinned. “So I suppose I should say, ‘welcome to the family!’ You’ll fit in well.”

“Dysfunction and all,” Varric snarked.

Ahrue was touched by the warmth of these people. Even Fenris with his slight moodiness radiated an easy affection for the people gathered. She wondered if he knew she and Solas were mages; from what she’d read in _The Tale of the Champion_, Fenris was not a fan of mage freedom and likely had not supported her decision to act on behalf of the mages during the rebellion. Of course, Hawke was similarly a mage who had sided with her fellow mages in defense of their freedom from Templar control. So Fenris had either come to see the corruption within the Templar order as a threat that outweighed that of unchained magic, or he’d learned to tolerate political differences in favor of domestic harmony.

Thinking of the rebellion and its impact on this family of misfits brought a question to mind: “How is it that you are living in Kirkwall again?” Ahrue asked. “I thought the tension after the outbreak of hostilities between mages and Templars had put you on the run.”

“It did for a time,” Hawke said. “But the actions of the Inquisition and the new Divine’s considerably more liberal position on mages has made me seem less like a radical and more like a
progressive who helped usher in the new era.”

“And the people of Kirkwall have not forgotten how Hawke defended them against Qunari, crazed Templars, and abominations alike,” said Fenris. “The Templars were not seen here as the paragons of faith and defenders of the innocents as they were in other parts of Thedas. They were an unstable element.”

Hawke nodded. “There is even a popular theory that Knight Commander Meredith blew up the Chantry herself to justify calling for the right of annulment. If it weren’t for my rather personal involvement in the events that day, I might even believe the theory myself. It seems rather more plausible than the truth. Wrong as they are, I certainly won’t disabuse them of the notion. It’s a… stabilizing fiction.”

“Indeed,” Solas said gravely.

Fenris shook his head and clenched his jaw and fists but remained quiet. An old argument, she suspected.

Ahrue yawned against her will.

“Oh it is late, isn’t it?” Hawke said. “Why don’t we pick this up in the morning, after you’ve had a good night’s rest? I’ll have a bed made up for you.”

“Thank you,” Solas said. “That would be most welcome.”

“Wait a minute,” Varric said. “Aren’t you curious why they’re here?”

“Of course,” said Hawke with a smile. “But you’ve already interrogated them about a faked death, a Venatori plot, and their love life. At this rate, we’ll have nothing to discuss over breakfast!”

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Solas woke before anyone else the next morning and took the opportunity to explore the volumes in Hawke’s library. Her literary interests were broad ranging: from dry Chantry history to tawdry
romances. And of course she had the complete collected works of Varric Tethras. Solas took *The Tale of the Champion* from the shelf and began flipping through it. No doubt Varric would pen *The Tale of the Herald* soon enough. He wondered how he would be immortalized in such a tale. The mysterious dreamer who advised and loved the Herald? The pompous cad who selfishly used and abandoned the romantic hero?

“You want me to sign that for you?” said Varric from the doorway. “How about I write, ‘To Solas—You hurt Ahrue again and Bianca and I will be paying you a sorely deserved visit. Your pal, Varric.’”

Solas closed the book and returned it to the shelf. Pompous cad it was then. “I have given Ahrue my apologies, and she has accepted them. Do you not trust her judgment?”

Varric leaned against the wall and put his hands in his pockets. “Oh, I trust her judgment, I just don’t think she’s being honest about what that judgment is. I have this weird feeling that she’s covering for you.”

Solas sighed. “What has transpired between us is quite personal and painful for us both; not sharing every detail with you is not the same as ‘covering’ for me.”

Varric shrugged. “Maybe not, but I get the impression that she’s still braced for a heartbreak with you.”

As well she should be, he thought. “And yet it’s a risk she is willing to take. If she is afraid that she may lose me, clearly the benefit outweighs the potential cost, by her estimation. Perhaps she believes herself capable of surviving heartbreak.”

Varric’s eyes narrowed. “You’re really not reassuring me here, Chuckles.”

Solas tilted his head. “It seems as though, by your own assessment, it is she who needs to be reassured. I trust that once she is secure that I will not abandon her, I will find myself generously restored to your good favor.”

Varric’s nostrils flared as he pressed his lips tightly together and rocked on his heels. “Yeah, seeing what you put her through, I wouldn’t count on getting good favor from anyone who stayed with her the last time you cut and run. Even Cole would be a hard sell at this point.”
“I regret leaving, Varric. I regret that my mistake caused her pain,” he said, the tension in his voice rising. “There is little I can say beyond that.”

Varric looked at him and sneered. “You regret causing her pain? Do you even get what you put her through?”

Solas’ stomach tightened. He did not. Ahrue had been unwilling to discuss the time between his departure and her choice to leave the Inquisition except to say that it was the darkest time of her life. “As you have pointed out, I was not there, and thus I cannot know.”

Varric moved in closer and lowered his voice. “Let’s put it this way, it was all fun and games (and by fun and games I mean crippling depression and whispers in her head) until the Despair demon showed up.”

Solas felt the blood drain from his face. “What?”

“Yeah. I guess with being walked out on and finding out she was having your kid, piled on top of your run-of-the-mill hero angst and guilt and whatever the Well of Sorrows was doing to her, she started to look like a decent meal to a hungry demon. So Despair set up camp… you know, surveyed the lay of the land, planted some crops, and almost made a permanent residence out of her.”

Solas felt ill. It was not uncommon for mages to attract a particular kind of demon, generally of a type that spoke to the individual’s weaknesses—Pride had visited Solas on multiple occasions—but Despair was likely the worst. If a person didn’t bargain with Despair, it would often drive them to suicide, sowing and feeding on the pain of its host until they could not endure the shame and hopelessness another moment. And it rarely left entirely until the victim was dead. A chill passed through him as he considered how much pain he had caused her, not only when he left her, but in the time since they’d been reunited. He’d sent her spiraling over and over again, and Despair had no doubt taken full advantage of every moment. He should have seen it.

“What is it, Chuckles? Feeling a little guilty?” Varric asked with a smug grin.

“I… did not know about the Demon. It explains much.” Solas took a deep breath, trying to collect his thoughts and find an appropriate response to this news. “Varric, I don’t believe she will thank you for telling me this. Whatever her reasons, she chose to keep it from me. But I am grateful to know. Thank you.”
Varric rubbed the back of his neck and winced. “Right. Maybe don’t tell her that I let her secret slip.”

Solas smiled weakly. “Ah. I apologize, but I must speak to her of her encounter with Despair, and she will likely draw the obvious conclusion.”

“Shit,” Varric mumbled. “Couldn’t you just say a spirit told you?”

“I could tell her an entity that crossed my path in the library revealed the truth. If she assumes ‘entity’ refers to a spirit, I will not correct her.”

“Thanks,” Varric said dryly with a roll of his eyes. “You’re a real friend.”

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When Solas entered the guest room where he and Ahrue were staying, Ahrue was sitting on the edge of the bed, lacing up her boots. “Good morning,” she said with a warm smile.

Solas closed the door behind him. “Good morning.”

She searched his face and furrowed her brow in concern. “Is everything alright? You look upset.”

“I am upset,” he said taking a seat beside her. “I was just speaking with Varric in the library.”

Ahrue gave him a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry he’s giving you a hard time. I can talk to him about it.”

Solas held up a hand. “It is no matter. His anger is well earned.”

Ahrue snorted. “My anger is well earned. His is over protective and disregards the validity of my choices. Besides, he doesn’t know the whole story.”
“Nor did I, it would seem.”

Ahrue scrunched up her face. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means it has come to my attention that I did you far greater harm than I ever realized.” He put his hand on her thigh. “You did not tell me about Despair.”

Ahrue flushed and she directed her gaze to the window, avoiding Solas’ concerned expression. "Varric told you.”

“He is worried for you. He thought it important that I understand the extent of the harm I caused by leaving. I don’t believe he intended to betray your confidence.” Solas put his hand to her cheek and gently turned her face toward him. “I am grateful he told me. You should not have had to suffer this alone.”

She trembled under his touch. “It’s in the past.”

“No. It is not,” he said gently. “And I believe you know that.”

She closed her eyes, and a tear slid down her cheek. “I can feel it sometimes, pulling at my thoughts. And... it’s difficult to forget the things it said, the guises it wore.”

Solas swallowed hard, knowing that Despair would have taken advantage of the pain he’d caused, no doubt wearing Solas’ face to abuse her and cultivate the shame and hopelessness it fed on. “Tell me,” he said heavily.

She took a deep ragged breath, and she told him. It hurt him to hear it, perhaps even more than it hurt her to tell him. The demon had exploited her deepest shame and fears, had used the people who loved her to lie to her and destroy her sense of purpose and belonging in the world. Solas stayed largely quiet as she described the torments to which she had been subjected. He spoke only four words intermittently: “It lied to you.” He saved these words for moments when she seemed to be crumbling under the force of the memory to remind her that, no matter how convincing the demon had been, its words were not a reflection of who she was or what others thought of her or felt for her. It had told a story that served its purpose, nothing more.

Once she had told him everything, he kissed the tears from her cheeks and held her close, saying
over and over: “I am here, Vhenan. Ar lath ma. You are safe.”

After a while she regained her calm, and kissed him. “I should have told you sooner.”

He stroked her hair. “It is no wonder you did not. I am only grateful that I have regained your trust enough for you to share now… even if it took a little prodding.”

She smiled softly and stood. “I’m going to wash up. I’m sure I look a mess.”

“You are beautiful,” he said adoringly, his heart filled with more affection and admiration for her than he had ever dreamed himself capable.

“Flatterer,” she said, batting her eyelashes. “I’ll meet you downstairs for breakfast.”

He nodded and she left the room. With her gone, Solas was free to stew. One thought moved to the forefront of his mind, heavy and permanent as stone: he would not sacrifice himself to renew the seal. As strong as Ahrue was, to add more loss to the already heavy burden she’d been forced to carry, and all while Despair yet haunted her, no one no matter their inner strength and power could be expected to endure such things. He now understood that she needed to believe he would live, that she would be free, and that their child would be kept out of Flemeth’s grasp because such beliefs were the only things that kept Despair at bay. It was up to him to make sure that her hope was not shattered.

He would use someone else to seal the Sanctum. One of the Sentinel would be the obvious alternative, even as the thought made his throat constrict in guilt. The price should be his to pay, but he could live with the shame of passing the burden of his debt to another if it meant saving Ahrue from Despair. He felt a pang of regret at having signed the contract with Mythal. It had seemed their only option, but perhaps he had given up too soon. He might have found some way to defeat Flemeth and use her soul to restore the seal. But such thinking was fruitless. His actions were bound by the contract.

What struck him as peculiar is that Ahrue had written the contract herself, had enchanted it to be binding, and yet she professed a hope, a belief even, that somehow Mythal would not take the child. If she were anyone else he would take this as a sign of denial or irrationality, but Ahrue was not one to take comfort in false hope. If she knew the contract prevented them from acting against Mythal, her despair would not be assuaged by the fantasy of the impossible. If this were the case, then perhaps acting against Mythal was not impossible by her estimation. Was there a counterspell that could break the contract? If that were the case, then why would Ahrue have agreed to Mythal’s terms in the first place? After all, breaking the contract would only return them to the
No. Ahrue had wanted the contract, so if she believed that it was possible to act against Mythal, it would be through an action that was permissible within the constraints of the contract. Solas’ breath caught and blood pulsed in his ears. He jumped to his feet and crouched beside the bag that held the text of the contract. He dug out the scroll and unfurled it. Ahrue’s words left every impression of being seamless: binding them by multiple names, restricting direct and indirect action. Except… he gasped… two words, paired together, opening up a small possibility for action: my magic. “Nor will my magic be used in any way (directly or indirectly) that will interfere with the passage of Mythal, Flemeth, Asha’belannar into the child of Ahrue’garastu.” Not “my actions” or just “magic,” but “my magic.” It had slipped by his and Mythal’s notice because it was obvious that only magic could prevent Mythal from passing into the child and only Solas could be bound by the contract. Further only an Elvhen could enter the sanctum, and Solas was the only Elvhen not already magically prevented from harming Mythal, so defending herself against Ahrue and the Sentinels would be pointless. Therefore, on the surface, specifying that his magic could not be used against her seemed to protect Mythal from interference. But with the two words paired together, a dangerous, razor thin possibility opened up that sent Solas’ mind racing.
Daisy

Ahrue entered the dining room of Hawke’s estate, feeling drained. Telling Solas about her encounter with Despair had left her raw. It was also a relief. In the months since it happened, she’d told no one the details of what Despair had put her through, nor about the way it continued to pull at her in her darkest moments. She was ashamed of her vulnerability to it and the persistent sense that not everything it had told her was a lie. While she was perturbed that Varric—always the well-meaning busybody—had told Solas, she was glad to now have Solas’ support and understanding. Still, discussing it had brought the emotions associated with those memories, emotions she had tried to bury, to the surface, leaving her exhausted and sensitive as an exposed nerve. Yet, despite it all, the sight that greeted her as she entered the dining room brought a thrill of happiness.

The table was spread with a selection of the foods she had grown up with: an assortment of fresh fruits, savory nut purees spread on rounds of grilled unleavened bread, large matras leaves enveloping what she knew by smell would be steamed corn mash and sausage sweetened with syrup from a hava tree. Hawke was pouring tea and smiled at Ahrue’s wide-eyed expression. “I thought a little taste of home might be a nice treat for you. Varric mentioned that you aren’t a fan of most dishes favored by humans.”

Ahrue breathed in the smells and grinned. “How did you know how to do all this? I haven’t had a good Dalish meal since I left my clan!”

Hawke handed her a cup of the minty tea. “I can’t take the credit. I asked a friend of mine for help. She’s Dalish herself. She’s just finishing up in the kitchen, and I know she’s positively giddy to meet you.”

“That would be Daisy?” Ahrue asked, taking the tea and nodding her gratitude. Varric had mentioned the quirky Dalish mage before.

Hawke laughed. “Daisy… Kitten… Most of us just call her ‘Merrill.’”

“Well, I’d be glad to meet her.” Ahrue was in fact hoping to meet Merrill and see if she might know the specific whereabouts of clan Sabrae and perhaps some insight into the right way to approach them.

Varric’s voice came from the next room, out of sight. “Will you let me give you a hand with that, Daisy!”
A second voice with a thick Dalish accent responded: “I can handle it, Varric! Stop pestering me about—Oh!” A loud crash and a wet splat sounded followed by an anxious: “Oh! Look what you made me do!”

“What I made you do?” Varric said with a gruff chuckle. “I offered to help!”

“You distracted me!” squeaked the second voice. “Now it’s ruined!”

“Easy, Daisy,” said Varric consolingly. “There’s plenty of food without the custard.”

“Oh! But it’s a traditional Dalish welcome dish. Without it, she’ll think I’m rude, or that I don’t want her here, or that I’ve forgotten our ways! I’ve made a mess of everything.”

“Besides the literal mess you just made, I think you’re overstating things a bit. She’s going to be glad just to have a breakfast that isn’t lumpy oatmeal and oily meats.”

Ahrue turned to Hawke who was smirking in the direction of the din. “Should I…” she started to ask, feeling guilty that Merrill was experiencing so much anxiety on her behalf.

“Oh, that’s just Merrill,” Hawke said with a shrug. “She has a hard time with new people, and she is especially worried about impressing you. She’ll calm down once she sees that you don’t hate her and aren’t offended by the scandalous absence of custard.”

Before Ahrue could respond, a very downcast looking, custard speckled elf walked into the dining room hanging her head and frowning. The corners of Hawke’s mouth twitched as she shook with silent laughter. “Hawke,” Merrill said sadly without looking up. “I spilled the custard. And I broke your big beautiful bowl. The one with the blue roses painted on it. But don’t worry! I’ll get you a new one, I promise!” Merrill lifted her eyes and jumped upon seeing Ahrue watching her. “Oh!”

“Merrill, this is Ahrue,” Hawke said. “And she was just telling me that she positively hates custard.”

“I’m so sorry! I should have asked if you liked it!” she said fidgeting and hopping on the tips of her toes. “I mean, it’s good that you don’t, because it’s on the floor… and me… and Varric. But I hope you like everything else.”
Ahrue opened her mouth to speak, but Merrill jumped back in before she could get a word out.

“Oh, and now I’ve completely forgotten my manners. You must think I’m awful. You’ve traveled all this way and I didn’t even give you a proper greeting.” She took a deep breath to collect herself. “Aneth ara. Or is that too familiar?”

Ahrue smiled, completely enchanted by this awkward, tender hearted young woman. “It is fine, lethallan!” she said, grasping Merrill’s hands. “I am delighted to meet you, and so grateful for the effort you put into this meal. It’s been well over a year since the last time I had a Dalish breakfast! It looks and smells wonderful.”

Merrill blushed and a little smile graced her thin lips. “I’m glad you like it. When Hawke and Varric told me you were here, I was so excited! I wanted to make you feel welcome.”

“You did. Ma Serannas.”

“You see! I told you she didn’t bite,” Varric said from the doorway, where he was wiping custard from his face and lapels with a dish towel.

“I didn’t really think you’d bite,” Merrill said hastily. “I just… sometimes other elves don’t like me much.”

“We can relate,” said Solas from behind Ahrue.

Ahrue released Merrill’s hands. “Merrill this is my…” she searched for the right word to call him by. “This is Solas.”

Solas bowed his head. “Greetings, Dalen. Varric speaks well of you.”

Merrill giggled nervously. “I’m sure he’s said some nice things about you too. Though I can’t recall any at the moment.”
Ahrue laughed loudly at Merrill’s likely completely unintentional bluntness.

Solas shot her a stern look before saying calmly, “I’m sure his representation of me was quite accurate, albeit one sided.”

Varric snorted.

“Well, she likes you,” Merrill said, giving Ahrue a sweet smile. “So you can’t be all bad, now can you?”

“I believe you are correct,” Solas said warmly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Varric said. “Now let’s eat before the food gets cold and Daisy starts apologizing again.”

The meal was excellent. Ahrue hadn’t realized how homesick she was until those familiar smells, flavors, and textures brought back memories of gathering for meals with her kin, sharing stories, arguing, laughing with their mouths full. And the company was wonderful. The five of them were joined by Fenris and Isabella about halfway through the meal. While there was obvious animosity between Merrill and Fenris, the group still felt very much like a family. They’d spent the better part of a decade together, sharing each other’s troubles and company, arguing, loving. They belonged to one another.

“I’ve never met your clan, you know,” Merrill said absently when the conversation found a lull. “Are they nice? I mean, they must be, because you’re nice.”

Ahrue grimaced. “I don’t know that I would describe them as nice. They are close knit, and they don’t much trust outsiders.”

“They must miss you very much,” Merrill said warmly. “I’m sure it was hard for your Keeper to send you away. Will it be a very long trip to them from here?”

“We aren’t travelling to clan Lavellan,” Solas said.
“Oh. I assumed you must be. With a baby coming.”

Fenris furrowed his brow. “If you are here to escape the reach of the Venatori, you should be warned that Tevinter slavers frequent the area. You are far from safe here.”

“That… is unsettling,” Solas said. “But that is not our aim either.”

“We’re here looking for clan Sabrae, actually,” Ahrue said, turning to Merrill. “According to the Inquisition’s most recent intelligence, they tend to camp near Kirkwall.”

Merrill flushed, and her gaze fell to her plate, avoiding eye contact with Ahrue, and she bounced slightly in her seat. “Oh, I… Yes, they do camp nearby. But… why would you want to see them?”

Ahrue exchanged a look of confusion with Solas. Merrill seemed terribly agitated at the mention of Sabrae. There was only one explanation for the elf’s discomfort she could think of. “Is Sabrae your clan, Merrill?” she asked gently.

Merrill’s large green eyes met hers. “Yes… I mean… they were. But I’m afraid they don’t like me much anymore.”

Fenris crossed his arms and snorted. “With good cause.” His harsh words brought Merrill to the cusp of tears, and Ahrue found herself liking him much less than she had a minute before.

“Love,” Hawke said, giving Fenris a tight smile, “I think Aveline wanted some help investigating a suspected slaver den. If you hurry, you might catch her before she sets out.”

He gave her a withering expression and shook his head. “As you wish,” he grumbled. With a nod to Solas and Ahrue he left the room, and they soon heard the front door slam behind him.

“I’m sorry, Merrill,” Ahrue said softly. “I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories. I know better than anyone how harsh the Dalish can be. I would not be welcome among my clan either.”

Varric shot her a confused and concerned glance, but Ahrue had no wish to elaborate.
“I won’t ask you to take me to them, but if you can show me on a map where I can find them, I would be very grateful.”

Merrill nodded quickly. “But, why would you want to see them? Are they in danger?” Ahrue’s heart broke for the sweet elf. Even though she was estranged from her clan, her first worry was for their wellbeing.

“No, lethallan. They have an ancient artifact called an Arulin’Holm. I’m sure you know of it. We need it.”

Merrill’s eyes widened, Isabella and Hawke let out a laugh, and Varric mumbled, “Well… shit.”

“What is it?” Ahrue asked, eyes darting to each of them. “Is there a problem?”

“I have it!” Merrill said brightly. “I used the Arulin’Holm to repair a mirror… or I tried to, anyway.”

“To repair a mirror?” Solas asked, face slack in stunned disbelief.

“Well, not just any mirror. A magic mirror from the days of Arlathan. It’s called an Eluvian.” She frowned, “But, the Arulin’Holm didn’t work.”

“May I see it?” Solas asked. His voice was outwardly calm, but Ahrue could sense the anxious charge in his tensed muscles.

“If you like. It is in my house in the alienage. I’ll take you there.”

“Ma serannas,” Solas said, bowing his head.

“But why do you want it?” Merrill asked, looking between Ahrue and Solas. “Or is that too nosey of me to ask?”
“I’m pretty curious myself, Daisy,” said Varric warily.

Solas looked to Ahrue, and she took the hint that he was leaving the truth or lie of why they needed the artifact in her hands. “Corypheus shattered the mirror in the Temple of Mythal,” Ahrue said simply. “We want to repair it.”

“What the hell for?” Varric snapped. “That shit is dangerous, and… weird.”

“To you perhaps. The Eluvian were quite mundane in their time,” said Solas.

Ahrue could not tell them the whole truth. It was too much to process, and Solas’ secrets were not hers to tell. “It is a part of our heritage and worth preserving if we can. Too much has been lost as it is.”

Hawke smirked. “Now where have I heard that before?”

Merrill’s smile lit up the room. “Oh, lethallan! You are wonderful! Can I help? I’d like to help! Oh, please, may I help?” she said, her excitement building with every word.

“Oh! Hold on a minute,” Varric said, rising to his feet. “Haven’t we been down this road before? Blood magic, demons, abominations? Ringing any bells?”

“Stop it, Varric,” said Merrill firmly. “It won’t be like that this time. I want to help.”

Ahrue and Solas exchanged glances again. They were clearly missing something, and she preferred not to come between Varric and his friend. “Merrill, giving us the arulin’holm would be immensely helpful.”

“And I would greatly appreciate the chance to see this broken Eluvian you spoke of,” said Solas. “I may even be able to repair it.”

“Hear that, Varric? He just wants to give Merrill a magic mirror!” Isabella said with a wink. “What could possibly go wrong?”
Varric groaned. “Come on, Hawke! Aren’t you going to do anything?”

“Me?” Hawke said with a laugh. “I’m quite sure they know more about all of this than I do. Besides, the mirror and the arulin’holm belong to Merrill. It’s her prerogative.”

“Ma serannas, Hawke,” Merrill said, beaming at her friend.

“But I would like to be nearby when you fix it in case anything goes awry,” Hawke added.

“I have no objections,” Solas said. “Though I think your concern is undue. The Eluvian are doors to magical passageways, nothing more. The vast majority of those doors are locked or broken. Without the proper keys to open the doors… at worst someone could become lost in the Crossroads.”

“With Merrill that is a very real danger,” Hawke said.


“The only people with a functioning Eluvian are Lady Morrigan and the Sentinels in Enansal’nan. So I suspect if someone were to walk out of the mirror, it would be one of them. However, it is a simple enough thing to seal the mirror when it is not in use, and it cannot be unlocked from the inside.”

Ahrue nodded, an understanding of the immediate usefulness of the mirror coming to her. “If you can repair it, we can use the Crossroads to travel back to Enansal’nan,” she said to Solas.

“Indeed. Not only would this shorten our voyage, it would allow us to avoid the large cities and ports where Ahrue is most likely to be recognized and where Venatori activity is currently most concentrated.”

Varric shook his head. “Shit,” he said, recognizing he could hardly argue against giving his friend safe passage. “You’re sure you wouldn’t rather just stay in Kirkwall instead? Hawke has the space, and no one here has a clue what the Herald of Andraste looks like. Besides, Merrill is positively
Ahrue smiled sadly. “It’s a tempting offer, Varric. But we need to do this.”

Varric sighed. “Why do I have this feeling you’re not telling me everything? Does this have anything to do with the Well of Sorrows?”

Ahrue nodded. “In a sense. It’s complicated, though. Everything is a mess right now. Fixing that mirror will help set some of it right.”

His dubious look told her he was not reassured.

“Besides,” she said with a grin. “After all of this is over, I plan to return to Enansal’nan and remain with the Sentinels. And if Solas can fix Merrill’s mirror, that would make us practically neighbors.”

Varric chuckled. “Okay, but you’re the one making the commute. That shit’s too weird for me.”

“You have a deal,” she said warmly. “Now let’s go see that mirror.”

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Ahrue had never been in an alienage before. Her dealings during her time with the Inquisition had been primarily with the rulers of Orlais and Ferelden; she’d had no occasion to visit the slums of the human dominated cities. Now, she felt ill looking at the squalor around her. It seemed much of the rubble cleared from the streets of Lowtown had been relocated here. Half-starved children played in the debris. An old woman coughed with what sounded like a terrible lung infection, and she wasn’t the only one who looked sickly. The whole area smelled like old garbage and rot.

“It didn’t used to be like this,” Hawke said gravely. “It was never good, but…” She shook her head, apparently at a loss for words.

“No one should have to suffer this,” said Solas under his breath.
Ahrue could find no words, but in her mind’s eye echoed visions of a distant past when a young red-headed elf had risen out of the squalor he’d been born to and refused to submit to the injustice that forced that suffering upon him. Ahrue took Solas’ hand in hers, while he struggled internally with whatever anger and pain this scene and the memories it stirred brought up for him.

“This way,” said Merrill stepping to the head of the group and leading them toward a red door at the far end of the alienage. Inside, Merrill’s home was a sharp contrast to the scene they had just walked through. The room smelled of sandalwood, a crackling fire filled the place with a warming glow, and everything was orderly, each object whether practical or decorative was arranged with great attention to detail. Merrill walked to a large wooden chest and unlocked it. She carefully removed various objects from within: potions, stones of various sizes and colors, runes, and at last the arulin’holm.

Ahrue’s skin prickled at the sight of is, and Solas exhaled slowly. They had come a very long way for this rather ordinary looking knife. Anyone who did not know its true function would assume it to be a carving tool, but in the right hands it was so much more. And soon it might be used to save the world. Merrill presented the Arulin’holm to them with an uncharacteristically serious expression on her youthful face. “Use it well, hahren.”

“Ma serannas, dalen,” Solas said, taking the tool reverently in his hand. “I will return it to you as soon as I am able.”

He planned to return after the sanctum was sealed. Ahrue’s skin warmed and she stifled a gasp that threatened to erupt from her lips at his words. This was the first time she’d heard him give any indication that he intended to live past the restoration of the sanctum. It may have been only words to him—he did not balk from lying, after all—but the sentiment moved her just the same.

Solas looked down at the neat piles of magical items Merrill had just removed from her trunk. “What is that?” he asked, indicating what looked like a ball of blue clay.

She smiled brightly. “I’m not exactly sure. It’s magic, I know that much. Or, it holds magic, that is. A friend of ours, Sandal, used to make them. But he could never tell us how he made them.”

“I have boxes and boxes of them in my cellar,” Hawke said.

“May I?” Solas asked.
“Of course!” Merrill said, handing him the small object.

He examined it his palm, channeling magic through it, and the little misshapen blue ball glowed brightly in his hand. He placed it on the table, and still it glowed. “How long does it hold magic before it dissipates?”

“Forever, I think,” said Merrill. “Unless someone triggers it.”

“What triggers it?” Ahrue asked.

“Proximity or contact depending on if it’s one of the blue ones or the green ones,” Hawke said.

Solas picked up the ball again and threw it to the ground where it sent out a small circle of frost. “Fascinating,” said Solas, tilting his head. “And they can hold any spell? No matter how powerful?” Ahrue’s pulse sped up, both begging him to recognize the potential and praying that he not say it out loud.

Hawke shrugged. “As far as I know. I saw Sandal take out an ogre with one. Froze it solid right in mid charge.”

Solas turned to face Ahrue. “These could be useful to us, vhenan,” he said, and she almost panicked for fear he would say it.

“Sure,” she said, forcing her voice and expression to stay calm. “Put some of these around our campsite and we won’t have to worry about the Venatori attacking us in our small clothes again.”

He nodded. “Not an experience I wish to repeat.”

“You can have as many as you like,” Hawke said. “The blue ones are excellent when you’re outnumbered or don’t have many lyrium potions. You just charge some up in advance, and you won’t need to worry about mana during the battle. Mind the area effect of the green ones though. They don’t know the difference between friend and foe, and you can’t control them once they are set.”
“Excellent,” said Solas with apparent waning interest. “Now, I would very much like to see your Eluvian.”

“Certainly.” Merrill said, and she led the way into her bedroom where the darkened mirror stood. Amidst the simple rustic charm of Merrill’s chambers, the tall mirror with its twisting ornate frame and animal carvings looked gaudy.

Solas circled the mirror, bending and craning his neck to investigate every detail. After a few minutes of this, he stood back and looked at it from a distance.

“What do think, Solas,” Merrill said hopefully. “Can you fix it.”

He shrugged. “It is not broken. Whatever repairs you made were successful.”

Merrill’s mouth fell open. “I don’t understand! It doesn’t work! I’ve tried everything!”

Solas smiled at her. “It is simply locked. What you need is a key. Come here, Dalen.”

Merrill looked at Ahrue uncertainly. “Go ahead, Merrill. He doesn’t bite either.” At least not in the waking world.

Merrill went to Solas. He positioned her in front of him, and took her right hand from behind, pressing his palm to the back of her hand. He whispered a few words in ancient Elvish that Ahrue understood to mean “The enemy is far from the gate. Let friends enter here.” He moved their hands together in a circular motion over the mirror, channeling his magic through her so she could learn how to direct the mirror herself. Suddenly the glass lit in a swirl of color.

Merrill jumped back, nearly toppling Solas in her surprise. She clasped her hands to her mouth. “Oh!” she said in utter adulation. “It is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen!” She whirled on Solas and hugged him tightly, pinning his arm to his sides. “Ma serannas! Serannas, serannas, serannas!”

Solas gave Ahrue a helpless grin. “It was my sincere pleasure, Dalen. You did most of the work yourself.”
Merrill then grabbed Ahrue in a hug. “Thank you, lethallan! Oh, Can’t I please come with you to the Temple of Mythal? I could fix the mirror for you!”

Ahrue laughed. She almost wished she could take Merrill with her. She would love to watch the excitable elf’s face as she took in the ancient beauty of the Temple of Mythal and Enansal’nan and assaulted the Sentinels with nervous yet irrepressible question. But it was not the right time for that. Maybe once all of this was over. “I think Solas and I can manage, Merrill. This is a task we must carry out alone.”

“But you’re letting him come with you,” Merrill said, casting a quick look at a bemused Solas. “Couldn’t ‘we’ include me?”

“But this time. But after the mirror is repaired, I’ll come back here and bring you to the Temple myself.”

Merrill pouted, but she nodded her acceptance of Ahrue’s word as final.
Over the next several days, Ahrue spent a lot of time out and about in Kirkwall. Varric was glad to show his friend around his home and excited to introduce her to all the real-life people and places that inspired the colorful characters and venues in his books. Only Anders and Sebastian were left out of Varric’s tour. Each had left Kirkwall for their own reasons, and neither was currently in Varric’s good favor. Solas regretted Anders’ absence. Not only was he intrigued by the all-too-familiar union between Justice and the man Anders had once been, he also wondered if his own considerable experience dealing with spirits could be of help to the young man in his predicament. But if anyone knew where Anders now traveled, they were not saying. Tevinter seemed the most likely place; if Anders was there, he was well out of the reach of the Chantry, the Templars, and, unfortunately, Solas as well. It was regrettable. He saw something of himself in the tales of Anders, both the good and the bad. Perhaps if Solas could survive his encounter with Mythal, he would seek Anders out. One more reason to find some way to exploit Ahrue’s carefully constructed loophole.

While Ahrue traveled Kirkwall, sticking mostly to the back roads to avoid notice, Solas spent much of his time in quiet solitude considering how to best make use of the opportunity Ahrue had left him. The contract prevented him from using his magic, but not from using someone else’s magic, and not from using non-magical methods. Even so, his options were greatly restricted. Only a being with an Elven soul could enter the outer sanctum, so recruiting Hawke’s army of friends was out of the question. As far as he knew, the only ones who could access the sanctum were himself, Mythal, the Sentinels, and Ahrue. With Ahrue and the Sentinel’s all bound to Mythal in some sense, it was improbable that any of them could act against her. Not directly, in any case. Ahrue had successfully written the contract to deceive Mythal, which suggested that indirect action against his old friend was permissible, even under the geas, as long as Mythal was not given cause to take direct control over Ahrue. The odd blue and green enchanted objects—which Sandal had apparently called “booms” and “wooshes”—were an ideal cover for Ahrue to lend her magic to defeat Mythal. Ahrue could charge the stones with spells, on the pretense that they would be useful against the Venatori. Solas could then use the booms and wooshes to… do something. And that was where his current predicament was: what could he do with these objects that could possibly defeat Mythal? What spell would be powerful enough? How could he defeat her before she used her superior power to crush him? And how could he channel Mythal’s soul in the restoration of the seal without using his own magic in the process?

Ahrue’s magic was powerful, certainly. But strong as she was, her magic would be a poor match for Mythal. Whose would be stronger, though? Hawke was certainly powerful, but when they had fought in Adamant and the Fade together, he had seen no indication that she was in any way Ahrue’s superior. The only other mage he could ask for help was Merrill. But when he had guided Merrill’s magic to activate the mirror, her power had felt strange, uneasy. It had seemed to him like directing a child in their first frightened attempts at channeling their energy into a focused spell. She had great power, without a doubt, but it was almost as though she, despite her age, was somehow ill-practiced at using magic. But if that were the case, how had she managed to repair a broken Eluvian? Such a feat would have required a great deal of magic sharply focused through the Arulin’holm. Perhaps she was just nervous or accustomed to an entirely different school of magic than he had directed her in using to unlock the mirror.
But how had she fixed the Eluvian? Solas liked Merrill very much, but it was difficult to imagine that she possessed the knowledge to use the Arulin’holm and repair the Eluvian. Despite the fact that she had been a First to her clan and was less than two years Ahrue’s junior, she exuded youth and naivety, and even her closest friends seemed to lack faith in her abilities. So how had she managed to accomplish a feat that only one other since the days of Arlathan had achieved?

Such questions stewed until Solas decided to entertain his curiosity and make the trip to Merrill’s house. She was predictably anxious upon opening her front door to find Solas standing there.

“Oh!” she said, flushing. “I wasn’t expecting company.” She leaned to the side, peaking around his shoulder. “Is Ahrue with you too?”

“No. Ahrue is occupied with Varric on a tour of the Undercity. I believe he is trying to convince her to remain in Kirkwall by showing how much the city could use her help.”

“That would be lovely! I hope she does!” said Merrill, clasping her hands to her heart. Then she blushed and looked away from him. “I mean, it would be lovely for us… and Kirkwall… not for you, I suppose. Unless you wanted to stay too, that is.”

Solas bowed his head. “Wherever she settles, so shall I.”

“Of course you would, because she’s wonderful, and you love her. And I’m sure you wouldn’t leave her again, no matter what Varric thinks. I mean, why would you? I certainly wouldn’t.” She blushed deeper. “If I were in your place, I mean!” she qualified abruptly.

Solas held up a placating hand. “Calm yourself, Dalen. I understand your meaning. And it is fine. She inspires admiration in many.”

Merrill smiled wistfully for a few moments and then jumped. “I’m so sorry! You came all this way and I haven’t even invited you in! After all this time, you’d think I would have gotten the hang of doors. The… um… inviting people through them part, that is. It only took me two or three days to figure out how to open and close them properly… the locking bit took longer. I… um… what was I saying?”

Solas smiled warmly. “I believe you were about to invite me into your home.”
“Right! Yes. Please, come in, hahren,” she said, stepping aside, so he could enter. “Can I offer you something to drink?” she asked, closing the door behind him. “I have… water.”

“I am fine, child. Do not trouble yourself. I have come for your conversation that is all.”

“Oh, alright,” she said, bouncing a little on her toes as she attempted what Solas supposed was meant to be a relaxed smile, but the knit eyebrows and fidgeting betrayed her.

“May we sit?” Solas asked, gesturing toward the table and chairs by the far wall.

She nodded rapidly, and they each took a seat. Merrill continued to bounce lightly in her chair. “You’ve decided to take it away haven’t you?” she said with a note of defeat in her voice.

“Take what away, child?” Solas asked.

“The Eluvian. Varric told you about… everything, and now you’ve decided I can’t be trusted with the mirror.”

Solas cocked his head. “I’m not sure what you think Varric has told me, but I assure you, I have no intention of taking the mirror from you. And I have no reservations concerning whether you can be trusted with the relic. I can think of no guardian more suitable than you to act as the Eluvian’s keeper,” he added. It was not an entirely true statement, but he wished to put her at ease with a vote of confidence that he hoped would inspire her to rise to the occasion.

She smiled weakly. “Do you mean it?”

“I do,” he said, his face a mask of utter sincerity. “After all, you managed to repair the Eluvian, a feat that only you and one other have managed in millennia. Anyone who could achieve such a thing certainly has the power to protect the Eluvian and sufficient knowledge to use it wisely.”

Merrill looked at him through wide eyes, her mouth still tensed with worry. “I… ma serannas.” She considered him for a few moments, chewing her lips absentley. “You… know a lot about the Eluvian, then?”
“I know more than most,” he said, attempting a humble tone. “As Varric may have told you, I have spent much of my life journeying the fade, conversing with spirits, and uncovering the latent memories that cling to places, including ancient memories of days long forgotten. I learned of the Eluvian in my journeys.” A truth concealing the fragment of a lie. He suspected Merrill would enthusiastically embrace the fact that he was actually from the days of Arlathan, however, he did not wish to field the barrage of questions that would undoubtedly follow. He had his own aims in this meeting, and he did not wish to see them derailed.

Merrill’s face brightened as he spoke. “You talk to spirits?”

“I do. Many of my closest friends are spirits whom I visit in the fade.”

“And you trust them?”

Solas cocked an eyebrow. Merrill’s tone did not seem judgmental of his relationship with spirits. She sounded excited, almost desperate. An odd response. He was not sure what to make of that. “I understand their natures,” he began hesitantly. “And I trust them to act within the confines of their natures. Beyond that, I am not certain how to answer your question.”

“You understand what they are, though. First hand, not from being told by the Chantry or a… Keeper.” Her face fell slightly.

“Yes,” he said cautiously, his uncertainty mounting.

“And, you would be willing to… work with a spirit, as long as you were careful regarding their nature?”

“I have allied with spirits before…” Solas said, voice laced with confusion. Was she asking him to talk to a spirit on her behalf? Seeking his advice regarding her own attempts? “Merrill, where is this going? I have a sense that your interest extends beyond simple curiosity.”

She looked away from him, and he followed her gaze to the Eluvian. “Yes, I suppose so. Did Varric ever tell you why I left the Dalish?”
“No. I assumed you left to aid Hawke.”

“Not exactly, no. It… was because of the mirror.” Merrill frowned. “I couldn’t make my Keeper understand how important it was that we repair it. She… wouldn’t help me. So I had to seek help… elsewhere.”

Solas nodded, understanding where this story was headed. “You sought help from a spirit.” That would explain her eagerness regarding his relationship with spirits; she was seeking validation to free her of the intense stigma she felt from her Keeper and clan.

“Yes,” she responded darkly. “There was a Pride spirit magically bound on Sundermount. It told me how to purify the tainted shards of the mirror with… blood magic.”

Solas’ mouth fell open. “You are a blood mage?”

Her small form tensed, and her hands closed in fists. “It is magic. It can’t be inherently good or evil. It is how it’s used that matters. And I have only ever used my magic for good.” Solas heard the practiced cadence of a well-rehearsed speech; she’d undoubtedly had cause to defend her magic from dogmatic judgment in the past.

“It is alright, Dalen,” Solas said calmly. “I quite agree with you.”

“You do?” Merrill looked on the cusp of tears at Solas’ unexpected acceptance and alleviation of her secret shame.

“Yes. There are risks to its practice, and it is commonly associated with blood sacrifices and demon-summoning. However, as you say, it could be used as readily for good as for evil. And there is great power in blood.” Solas gasped once the words left his lips. Great power in blood. Mythal had said those words. It was why she wanted the child, because the bloodline that ran through its veins contained the careful concentration of the ancient pantheon’s power. It was the power of blood that Mythal had been cultivating for millennia, power that surpassed anything she had been able to access in the past.

“Solas?” Merrill said, pulling him from the thrill of possibility that quickened his pulse. “Are you alright?”
“I am fine,” he said, his mind racing. “I have never used blood magic, thus my knowledge of it is entirely theoretical. Would you consider yourself to be adept at its use?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Merrill, nerves buzzing in her tone. “I suppose I’m alright.”

Solas leaned forward. “Merrill, this is no time for modesty. Do you believe yourself to be a powerful blood mage?”

Merrill fidgeted under the intensity of his gaze. “Yes, I think so. But, with blood magic, it isn’t just about the power of the mage… not entirely, anyhow. The power of the blood and the amount of blood used effects the power of the spell. And I only use my own blood or that of people who have… died. Not sacrificed, I mean, but in battle.”

He frowned. The quantity of blood could be a problem. A drop or two could likely be arranged, but if taking the child’s blood constituted harm, the contract would specifically prevent him from acting. The more blood he took, the more likely he would be skirting that line of harm. “I see,” he said reclining back in his seat. Perhaps this was not the solution he had been hoping for.

“I’ve disappointed you, somehow, haven’t I?” Merrill said, worry creasing her forehead.

“No, dalen. I have a magical predicament that I thought perhaps blood magic could solve. I was wrong.”

“What did you want to use it for? Fixing the Eluvian in the Temple of Mythal?”

Solas considered Merrill. She knew more of blood magic than he did. Perhaps if she understood his and Ahrue’s predicament she could help him come up with a solution. But then, too much truth would complicate things further, so he proceeded cautiously. “There is a being of great power—an ancient abomination—who intends to possess Ahrue’s and my child,” he said heavily, the pain and worry he tried not to feel washing over him as he spoke. “Ahrue is bound by a geas that prohibits her from interfering in the possession. And she could even be forced to act against my efforts to save the child. I am trying—and failing—to find a way to defeat this being before it can possess the child.”

“Mythal’enaste,” Merrill murmured under her breath.
The irony of her Elvish plea to divinity made Solas snort. “Mythal’s favor will not help us, dalen. What we need is considerable power that I can use to defeat this being.”

“But, why would the abomination even want your child in the first place? Not that there’s anything wrong with your baby. I mean, I’m sure it’s completely lovely, and any demon would be lucky to have it. But… isn’t it a little out of the ordinary for a demon to try to possess a baby?”

Solas smirked inwardly at her verbal fumbling. “You are correct. It is unusual that an abomination or demon would seek out an unborn child for possession. However, our child is quite unusual as well.” He took a deep slow breath, uncertain how much he should tell her. “It seems the child has an exceptionally powerful bloodline, descended from the most powerful elven mages who have ever walked this earth. And, as you well know, there is great power in blood.”

Merrill straightened in her chair and puckered her face thoughtfully. “Its blood is more powerful than yours or Ahrue’s separately then?” she asked.

“So it would seem. I had thought to use the power of its blood against the abomination. However, there is obviously a greatly limited quantity of the blood at my disposal; I cannot risk harming the child.”

“I see,” Merrill said distantly. “There may be a way to work around that…”

Solas perked up. “Merrill, if you can think of anything that will help…”

“Maybe,” she emphasized, keeping Solas’ enthusiasm in check. “Hawke and Fenris kill a lot of Tevinter mages, you know. Sometimes I help. They come to the Free Marches looking for slaves, especially lately with the Circles, sort of, broken. Mage blood is particularly powerful in blood rituals, so Magisters will pay a lot for a mage slave. Or that’s what Fenris says, anyway. With the mages out of the Circles, the traffic in mage slaves is not good… Well good for Tevinter, I suppose… But not at all good for mage refugees in the Free Marches.”

Solas frowned. One more injustice of this world that should be corrected. “That is regrettable,” he said with a sigh. “But I am uncertain how it connects to my predicament.”

“Oh, right,” Merrill said, shaking the melancholy from her tone. “I guess I wandered a bit. Sorry.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “Sometimes the Tevinter mages leave things behind. You know… when they die. Well, I guess they always leave things behind, but sometimes those
things are useful. Well, this isn’t one of those things. Or, at least I thought it wasn’t, but it was interesting, so I remembered it. And now maybe it is useful after all! I hope so, anyway.”

Solas’ patience was wearing thin. “What is it you think may be useful, Merrill?” he said with practiced evenness.

“Right. There was a book on the body of a Tevinter mage, two years ago... or was it three?... Anyway, Hawke brought it home for me. She told me not to tell Fenris. But it was very interesting... the book, I mean. It was titled Blood Magic and Practical Miscesanguination. It was all about mixing blood in blood magic rituals, either combining blood with other substances—like lyrium or plant essences and such—or mixing blood with blood from multiple people. The theory behind the practice is that the blood takes on different characteristics when combined with other substances or other people’s blood. When done properly, miscesanguination can strengthen particular spells. The most common practice is to mix non-magical blood with liquid lyrium in rituals and spells that require, or would benefit from, mage blood. The lyrium infused blood can act as a substitute of sort. Another practice is a regular part of marriage agreements among the upper classes Tevinter. By combining the blood of two people and testing the mixture, you can tell if the magical power in the separate blood lines would likely be strengthened or weakened by joining the two families. If the mixture is more powerful than its parts, the families will generally agree to a marriage. That’s the idea, anyway.”

Solas’ gaped at the young mage. “I see!” he breathed. “By combining my own blood with Ahrue’s, the result would be a mixture of similar magic potential to that which our child possesses.”

“Possibly. I’ve never tried it. But you could probably take more blood from you and Ahrue than you could from the wee little one. Enough to do a proper spell or two, anyhow.”

Solas smiled. This could work. “Merrill you may well have saved my child’s life with that information. Ma serannas, lethallan.”

“Oh, you’re welcome,” said Merrill with a nervous smile. “But... will it really do any good? You said you don’t practice blood magic...”

Solas reached into his pocket and pulled out one of Sandal’s blue enchanted stones. He placed it on the table between them. “I will need your help, Merrill, if you are willing to give it.”

Merrill’s face lit up as much with delight as anxiety. “You want me to cast the spell and store it in this? You would trust me with that?”
“You are my only hope, Merrill. My magic is not well suited to the task, and Ahrue cannot act against the abomination. I believe blood magic can achieve our desired ends. And I believe you have the necessary skill and power to cast the spells I need.”

“Alright then,” Merrill said, her tone determined and her face set. “Tell me what spells you need, and bring Ahrue here. We can get started right away, if you like.”

Solas’ shoulders slumped. And there’s the rub. Getting Ahrue’s blood would be a problem. He wasn’t sure how he could convince her to take part in a blood ritual without potentially alerting Mythal to his plan. And the thought of taking Ahrue’s blood without her knowledge or by deception made his stomach turn. He fully intended to never deceive or manipulate her again, and now here he was once more with a problem best handled by doing just that.

“Is there a problem?” Merrill asked.

He sighed. “Yes. Ahrue. If she knows about my plan, the abomination will know as well, and the geas will prevent her from taking part.”

“Oh,” said Merrill, and she too slumped forward, looking spiritually deflated. “So, you would have to lie. I’m rubbish at lying. Hawke tells me I bounce too much, and fidget, and I let things slip. She leaves me behind when she needs to lie. She’s very good at it, though. The lying, I mean. Are you any good at lying?”

Solas laughed weakly. “Yes.”

“But Ahrue knows you so well, and she’s so clever, she could probably tell. Isabella loves to lie, but Hawke and Varric can always tell. I can’t, though. Neither can Fenris, but he thinks everyone is lying all the time, so it’s a little different, I suppose. And Aveline just thinks Isabella is lying all the time.”

Merrill’s babbling brought an idea to mind. Ahrue had become well acquainted with his tendency to lie. And, for better or worse, her healthy and well-earned distrust of him made her particularly alert to the possible meanings and deceptions of his words. When he’d commented on Sandal’s enchanted stones days earlier, suggesting that they would be useful against the Venatori, he’d thought he had detected a glimmer of understanding in her eyes, a recognition of his real intention under the cover of his entirely plausible lie. Perhaps her alertness could work in their favor again, allowing her to recognize the truth obscured by a falsehood that would satisfy Mythal.
Solas drummed the surface of the table with his fingertips. “Merrill,” he said, an impish grin playing on his eyes and lips. “I have a plan.”
Ahrue sat at the writing desk in the guest bedroom where she and Solas had been staying. The whiteness of the blank page in front of her was blinding. Her hand was poised above the paper, inked quill at the ready. But what to say? Dorian deserved to know the truth. They’d had an odd kind of friendship, based more on respect and support than actual understanding of one another. They were, in almost every respect, worlds apart. And understanding where the other was coming from was as often as not a failed effort. But he had cared for her and her for him despite the insurmountable differences between them. And he had believed in her even when all of her other friends thought to doubt and protect her from her questionable decisions. Had the news of her death made him regret that faith in her? Would he heap blame for her demise on the already sizeable mound of self-loathing he carried with him? If so, it was in her power to ease his pain, regardless of Leliana’s cautions against it.

But what to tell him? He would be furious at the Inquisition for toying with his emotions, and likely offended that they had doubted his acting skills, opting to lie to him instead of wagering on his ability to put on a show of believable grief. Ahrue smirked imagining the dramatization of his offense he would treat her to, should they ever be able to meet face to face.

There was also the matter of Solas. Dorian and Solas had gotten on well enough during their travels. She would even go so far as to say that Solas had a positive impact on Dorian, broadening his perspective to consider suffering beyond that which he endured. However, once Solas broke things off with Ahrue, Dorian—utterly devoted to those few he calls friends—was firmly decided against him. He would not likely be in favor of Solas returning to Ahrue’s life again. And what would he say if she told him that Solas was Fen’harel? She suspected his skepticism would trump his trust in her in this case.

She sighed, running the edge of the quill’s feathers against her cheek as she thought. He didn’t need to know about Solas. A simple message would do. “Dear Dorian,” she started.

With that, the door of the room opened and Solas stepped in, looking shaken. “Vhenan,” he said breathlessly and knelt beside her, his hand on her thigh. “Merrill is a blood mage!”

Ahrue laughed at both the absurdity of the notion that sweet, awkward Merrill was a blood mage, and at the oddness of his adulation as he said the words. “Merrill is a blood mage,” Ahrue echoed blandly. She pressed a hand to his cheek. “Have you already been in Kirkwall too long that you’re seeing blood magic everywhere?”

His eyes had an impish glimmer that always both thrilled and unnerved her. “I speak the truth. It is how she repaired her Eluvian. The pieces were corrupted by the blight, the blood magic purified them. She was then able to channel the necessary power through the Arulin’holm to complete the
Ahrue shook her head in disbelief. Fascinating, but why did Solas care? He had no reservations concerning blood magic, and the mirror in the Temple of Mythal was only broken, not corrupted. “That is… interesting. But, why the sudden interest in blood magic?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

He grinned wickedly, making her skin prickle. “Blood magic is perhaps the most powerful school of magic there is. Can you think of no apparently impossible task that might benefit from its application?”

Ahrue’s pulse quickened. She could think of one, but she didn’t dare say it out loud. “I’m sure there are many practical uses for it. But, I can’t think of anything specific, no.”

“The orb,” he said in almost a whisper.

She gapped at him. “The orb? You said the orb couldn’t be repaired.”

“I did. So had Merrill’s Keeper assumed the Eluvian beyond repair. The corruption from the blight had deadened its magic. Only once the corruption was purified could the magic of the shards be rejoined with the Arulin’holm.”

“But the orb isn’t blighted,” she said, wanting desperately to believe it was possible, but fearing the hope it teased.

“Corypheus was a darkspawn, was he not?” said Solas brightly. “I find it possible that the reason the shards of the orb have lost their enchantment is that Corypheus’ prolonged contact with them blighted the pieces. If Merrill can use blood magic to purify the pieces, I may be able to repair the orb with the Arulin’holm. I wouldn’t have to die.” His eyes were pleading. “I do not know if it will work, Ahrue. But is it not worth a try?”

It was. She would prefer a world where the gods stayed locked away and Mythal was sacrificed to restore the seal instead of Solas, but failing that, having Solas alive and at her side would be worth almost any risk. She nodded mutely, not able to give voice to her conflicted hope.

He jumped to his feet and kissed her enthusiastically. But when he broke away, his face was
serious. “There is more.”

“What?” she said, the dread nestled perpetually in the pit of her stomach roiling at his grim tone.

“Merrill believes the spell will require a great deal of power.”

“How much?” she asked, visions of bodies being lined up and drained darkening her thoughts.

He pressed a hand to the swell of her belly and every fiber of her being recoiled. “The bloodline of the Uth’elgar’vhen would likely carry the necessary power.”

“Why would it need that much power?” she said, throwing his hand from her abdomen. “If Merrill purified the shards with ordinary blood, why would you assume this would require more?”

“Because we already tried and failed,” he said, showing a gash on the palm of his hand, mostly closed by magic healing. “We need more powerful blood.”

“We can’t,” she said, voice dangerous and low. “The contract forbids harm being done to the child.”

“True,” he said, taking a seat on the edge of the writing table and folding his arms. “But you may recall Dorian describing the practice of miscesanguination: a form of blood magic used in Tevinter to determine suitable pairings for marriage arrangements.”

Ahrue did not remember Dorian mentioning miscesanguination at all. She generally had complete faith in the reliability of her memory, and anything related to magic usually captured her interest completely. “I’m having trouble recalling,” she said shaking her head. “When did Dorian tell us about this?”

“Passing the time in the Storm Coast, I believe,” Solas said with a shrug. “It was just before we approached the Chargers for Inquisition employ.”

That was wrong. They had not even met Dorian yet when they hired Bull and his Chargers in the Storm Coast. Of that she was certain. Either Solas’ memory was wrong—which seemed even less
plausible than Ahrue’s memory being wrong—or Solas was lying. What’s more, he was telling a lie that Ahrue would know instantly to be false. So the lie was not intended to deceive her. The only other party witnessing their current conversation was Mythal, thus the lie had to be meant for her. “Ah right!” Ahrue said, snapping her fingers. “He was telling us about how his family had chosen his intended bride from a line-up of eligible young women. I forgot the word for the practice.” Her blatantly false recollection would be sufficient to let Solas know that she understood: he could not speak plainly about his plan. Anything he said or did in this conversation was meant to be a cloak to conceal his true motive: to defeat Mythal.

“Yes,” he said smiling. They understood one another. “I believe we can use the basic principles of this practice to harness the same power as is in our child’s blood without harming it. We simply combine our blood, and Merrill can attempt to use it to purify the orb shards.”

“Great,” Ahrue groaned. “Haven’t I bled enough on this trip?”

“We will each take a sleeping potion. We may need some time to recover afterward, but we will feel no pain during the spell. And Merrill has assured me she will be very, very careful not to kill us.”

Ahrue exhaled heavily and rubbed the back of her neck. “You’re sure about this?” she asked.

He laughed. “Not at all. But I believe you were the one who expressed a desire to plan for the future with reckless optimism.” He frowned, and his eyes fell to her stomach. “I may not be able to prevent Mythal from taking the child, but if this works, I can at least be there to support you in whatever comes next.”

Ahrue didn’t know what he actually had planned. But she hoped his confession of his limitations was part of the deception intended to keep Mythal unwary. However, whatever his actual plan, he was right, the chance of having him with her after Mythal took her due was worth whatever risk the blood magic posed.

“So,” she said, giving him a wry half smile. “What does one wear to a bloodletting?”

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When Ahrue and Solas arrived at Merrill’s house, she was ominously sharpening the same knife that had once been plunged into Ahrue’s back by a Venatori. “You’re sure that blade is no longer cursed?” she murmured to Solas.
“Quite sure,” he said, placing a hand on the small of her back to urge her forward. “Everything will be all right.”

Merrill looked up from her work with wide eyes. “Oh! You’re here! I wasn’t sure if Solas would be able to convince you. But I’m glad he did. Not that I want to… use your blood. But he says it’s important that we… fix this ancient relic of yours. And I’m certainly interested to see what it does!”

The sunniness of Merrill’s affect was a little unsettling considering the darkness of the ritual she was about to perform. Imagining sweet adorable Merrill cutting into their flesh with a song in her heart and a bounce in her step sent shivers down Ahrue’s spine. “Let’s get this over with, please,” Ahrue said, closing her eyes.

“Right,” said Merrill with sudden seriousness. “Do you have the relic?”

Solas placed the satin bundle he was carrying on the table and unwrapped the orb pieces.

“Good,” Merrill said. “Now drink these, please, and lie down on either side of the table.” She handed a potion to Ahrue and one to Solas.

Ahrue took a deep breath and drank the contents of the potion, which tasted roughly like fennel and demon bile and made her gag as she choked it down. She quickly reclined on the floor, and watched as Solas did the same. They turned their heads toward one another, and he smiled, reaching out a hand to take hers. They interlaced their fingers and Ahrue was unnerved to notice that he was shaking as much as she was. The room began to lose focus, and Merrill’s voice was garbled in a sleepy haze as she said to herself: “It’s alright. You can do this.”

-x-

Once it was clear that the sleeping potions had taken effect, Merrill set to work. She wrapped the shards of the strange relic back in the satin scarf, and moved them from the table to her desk. Whatever this object was, Solas had not told her. He’d said only to play along and pretend that she was trying to use the blood magic to purify the shards. When they woke up, she was to say that she wasn’t sure if it worked, that the pieces had a strange energy that had made it difficult to even be sure that they were corrupted. She’d repeated the speech for him several times over until he was satisfied that she would get it right. The lying made her nervous, but she was almost always nervous anyway, so he’d said that nerves would make her lie more convincing, not less.
Merrill placed one of Sandal’s enchanted stones – a woosh—onto the table. Beside it she placed the knife Solas had given her. Two spells, each requiring more power than she had ever channeled in her life. She was thrilled that Solas believed her capable enough to work this magic, and she was touched by the trust each of them had shown in her. She doubted any of her other friends would put their lives in her hands quite like this. She wanted to do a good job, especially since Solas had told her that if she failed, the child would be possessed and Solas would likely die.

“You can do this,” Merrill said to herself. “It’s just like any other spell you’ve cast, only… bigger.” She took a small dagger from her belt. She looked at the sleeping forms of her two new friends and took a deep breath. “Mythal’enaste,” she whispered. “Please, don’t let me kill them.”

She brought the ceramic basin to Solas’ side first. She willed her hands to steadiness as she made the cut, holding his arm over the basin as the blood drained. She took as much as she dared, before stopping the blood flow with magic. He was pale but alive. She took the basin to Ahrue’s side. Again Merrill focused her nerves to stillness before cutting open the woman’s arm and letting the blood stream into the vessel. She felt so sad looking at Ahrue’s sleeping face. She was beautiful and kind and deserved better than what this abomination was doing to her. Merrill stroked the curve of her belly curiously. She fancied she could sense the babe’s power as it moved slowly within its mother’s womb. If the child’s blood was as powerful as Solas supposed, what kind of person would it become? If the abomination took it, what kind of monstrous acts would be done with that power? She’d thought she’d seen the worst mages could do. But those were just ordinary mages, not mages with special blood. If someone truly evil had that much power, there was no telling what harm they could do to this world. If, on the other hand, it was raised to goodness, how might that power be channeled into great acts of beauty and kindness? They could make the world a better place. Merrill smiled.

Ahrue moaned softly in her sleep, and Merrill suddenly realized she’d been bleeding her for quite a while.

“Oh!” she exclaimed befuddled as she hurriedly closed the wound. “I’m so sorry!” She wiped the sweat beading on her brow with her forearm. “No reason you need to know about that, right?” she said to the sleeping Ahrue. “You’ll be fine. Just a little… weaker than usual. Everything is alright. The cut closed right up.”

Sufficiently assured that she wouldn’t have to confess her minor mistake to Ahrue and Solas, Merrill turned her attention to the basin of blood. She could feel the magic in it even without touching it. She got to her feet and lifted the vessel to the table. “Alright,” she said to the blood. “Time for you to miscesanguinate.” Merrill circled one hand over the basin, drawing mana from the veil and channeling it into the pool of blood. The liquid rippled in concentric circles, bringing a smile of satisfaction to Merrill’s face, a gleam of victory to her bright eyes. She could sense the blood changing beneath her slowly circling hand. And, as it changed, she could feel the magic it contained growing and changing as well. “Oh!” she breathed as she shied away from the powerful
The miscesanguination had worked. The blood that now filled the bottom of the basin was far more powerful than Ahrue’s and Solas’ blood had been separately. She trembled at the thought of the impending ritual, when all that power would be surging through her as she tried to focus it into two spells: one on the stone, the other on the dagger. Her knees felt weak. Merrill looked down at Ahrue’s ashen face. “You have to do this,” Merrill said to herself. “She needs you. It’s a chance to make up for all the times people got hurt helping you. If you can help them, it will make all of it worthwhile. It will make all of it mean something important.” She set her jaw, keeping back the tears that threatened to break lose. “Just take a deep breath and do it.”

Merrill followed her own instructions, breathing deeply and plunging her hand into the blood-filled basin. A scream escaped her parted lips as the power of the blood burned through her. “It’s… too… much!” she gasped. She wanted to pull away, to break her connection to the blood, but through that blood, she felt the heartbeats of the others in that room, felt their need through their sacrifice. So she kept the connection. With her free hand, Merrill pressed her palm to the stone. She focused on the stone and the magic of the blood, letting everything else fall away from her attention, until even her pain was numbed in the consuming ritual. When she was certain the spell was securely stored within the stone, she broke her contact with the blood, and gasped for air.

One more. Just one more, and she could be done. She moved the basin to the floor beside Solas. She grasped his dagger in her hand and a sickening dread filled her. “I really hope you know what you are doing with this, Hahren,” she said to Solas’ still form. After a few deep breaths and words of encouragement to herself, Merril again plunged her hand into the searing hot blood. It hurt less this time; she understood its strange power better, or perhaps the blood was just more used to her this time around so it fought her less. Merrill grasped the handle of the blade and plunged it into Solas hand. With the dagger driven firmly into his flesh, Merrill channeled the magic of the blood into the blade, casting a spell whose true dark purpose she dared not even guess at.

-x-

Solas’ eyes snapped open, and he bolted into an upright position. His head spun wildly, and he feared for a moment that he would faint. He was still on the floor of Merrill’s home. Ahrue was sleeping, her skin ashen, but her breath steady. He sighed in relief. Grabbing the lip of the table between them, he pulled himself to a standing position. For a moment anyway. He caught himself against the table as his legs shook and buckled beneath him. On the table, the fragments of the orb were positioned just as he’d left them.

He stumbled to the doorway that separated the main room from Merrill’s bedroom. The elf was sleeping in her bed. He took a few unsteady steps and sat heavily on the foot of her bed, where he held his head in hopes of staying off a collapse. His contact with the bed woke Merrill from her sleep. She sat up and yawned, rubbing her eyes with tight fists.
“You’re awake,” she said happily. “I hope the floor was soft enough. But then, it is a floor, I suppose, so it probably wasn’t soft at all.”

“Merrill,” Solas said firmly, unwilling to follow her verbal meanderings just then. “Did it work?”

She nodded at the dagger and stone that were sitting out in the open on her nightstand. “I think so. But I can’t be sure until you try them.”

Solas exhaled heavily, cautious relief filling his being. “There will be no trial run with these. If you believe the magic succeeded that is enough for me.” He looked toward the main room. “How much longer will Ahrue sleep?”

“I gave her half again as much of the sleeping potion, just like you told me.”

He nodded. Good. “Let’s practice what you are going to say when she wakes up.”

Merrill huffed but agreed.

“And please conceal the stone and the dagger in my bag. I do not wish to explain why I have them out.”

“Yes, hahren,” Merrill said. She reached for the objects but paused and turned back toward him. “I thought you’d be happier.”

Solas managed a shaky smile. “I am affected by the loss of blood, Dalen. And much could still go wrong. But I am indeed happy, and deeply grateful for your help.”

-x-

When Ahrue woke up, Solas was sitting on the floor in the spot he’d been when they’d fallen asleep. He was cradling his head in his hands, likely shaky from the loss of blood. Merrill was nowhere to be seen. Ahrue sat up. Besides some dizziness and a lingering fogginess from the
sleeping potion, she felt surprisingly well. “Are you all right, Solas?” she asked.

He turned to her and smiled. “I am well. And you?”

“I’m okay. Better than I expected.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

Ahrue peeked over the edge of the table at the pieces of the orb. “Did it work?”

He sighed. “I do not know. I have been too nervous and weak to verify the success or failure of the ritual.”

She nodded. “Where’s Merrill?”

“Sleeping in the next room, I believe,” he said, waving in the direction of Merrill’s bedroom.

Ahrue very slowly pulled herself up on the edge of the table. She looked at her arm. Whatever damage Merrill had done to her flesh, she had done a nice job of healing it afterward. She suspected blood mages who used primarily their own blood would have to be adept healers to avoid accidentally bleeding themselves to death. “She does good work,” Ahrue said, stretching the skin of her arm with her fingers, trying to find any sign of the cut. “If it weren’t for the dizziness, I’d wonder if she’d performed the ritual at all.”

“Oh, thank you,” Merrill said poking her head into the room. “I try not to leave any marks.”

“You did a good job, Merrill,” Ahrue said smiling. “Ma serannas.”

Solas, still sitting on the ground, turned to Merrill. “Did it work?”

Merrill came the rest of the way into the room and looked down at the broken pieces of the orb. She nibbled on a fingernail and frowned. “I’m sorry; I’m not sure. I tried, I really tried, but the fragments have a strange energy about them. I can’t even be sure they were corrupted at all.”
Solas stood up and leaned against the table. He took one of the pieces in his hand and frowned.

“You could try the Arulin’holm, see if it works.”

Solas shook his head. “There is no need. Whatever was done to them cannot be repaired. I can feel it.”

Ahrue had seen that look on his face before when he’d crouched over the shattered orb in Haven. Ahrue did not know if his plan had actually involved repairing the orb, but in that moment she felt his grief at its brokenness. She reached out and turned his face toward hers and studied the pain in those sad grey eyes. “Solas, I’m so sorry. I know you wanted this to work. But we’ll find another way.”

He nodded, but he looked as though he doubted the possibility. “I am sorry to have put you through this unnecessarily.” He said, stroking her forearm. “And I’m sorry to have wasted your time,” he added looking to Merrill.

“Oh, please don’t be sad!” Merrill said, her own voice brimming with emotion. “I only wish I could have done better.”

“You did fine, Merrill,” Ahrue said softly. “It was simply an impossible task. And we appreciate your trying.”

Ahrue honestly wasn’t sure what to feel. Had Solas’ plan failed, or was this all a ruse to keep Mythal off balance? She couldn’t ask, and if Solas had left her any hints at the truth, she hadn’t found them. She decided to settle with an emotion of disappointment, having never really believed that the orb could be fixed. That response would satisfy Mythal’s expectations, at least. Whether this day had actually been a win or a loss, Ahrue would have to wait to find out.
Ahrue carefully rolled up her spare set of smallclothes and tucked them into her rucksack. She had brought very little with her to Kirkwall, the bulk of her possessions waiting for her in Enansal’nan. What had been a week long journey to arrive in Kirkwall would now take them only minutes by cutting through the Crossroads between the Eluvian. For that much she was grateful; she was eager to get this trip over before the changes in her body caught up with her. So far, beyond a persistent backache and a general feeling of physical awkwardness, she had managed the pregnancy well. Perhaps being leashed to the goddess of motherhood had its advantages, she thought wryly, remembering the women of her clan making offerings to Mythal in hopes of being granted smooth pregnancies and easy deliveries. If she and Solas managed to defeat Mythal, would she pay for her betrayal in a difficult labor?

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Come in,” she called out.

Varric entered the room and leaned against the nearby writing desk, looking sullen. “Taking off again?” he asked.

She nodded. “We have what we came for. Best to finish this journey as quickly as possible.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I still don’t understand any of this,” he said, voice tired and laced with worry. “Why bother with this mirror? Why not just stay here or go back to the Forest Kingdom of the Ancient Brooding Elves and forget about this mess?”

Ahrue fastened her bag closed and leaned forward against the bed, gathering her patience with slow breaths. “We’ve done this before, Varric. You can’t change my mind any more this time than you could in Skyhold. I need to do this.”

“But why?” he pressed. “You almost died once on this mysterious quest to understand the Well. Don’t you think maybe that was a sign that this isn’t the best thing for you to be doing right now?”

She laughed. “If I always took almost dying as a sign that I should walk away, you’d be on your knees saying ‘all hail Corypheus’ right about now.”

He chuckled. “Fair enough, but this is different. You’re not saving the world this time, you’re risking your life and the nugget for the sake of your curiosity. Doesn’t that sound a bit reckless to you?”
Ahrue sat on the edge of the bed, looking out the window into Hawke’s garden where Solas and Hawke were busy enchanting a few dozen of Sandal’s stones for easy use during their journey. “There’s a lot more at stake here than you realize, Varric. I got my answers about the Well, about everything. More than I ever wanted to know. It’s a lot to carry, but I can’t turn away from it now.”

Varric crossed the room to face her. “I don’t like the sound of that,” he said, his voice more gravelly than usual. “What is it you found out exactly?”

She wanted to tell him. She wanted his support and his sympathy instead of this doubt that subtly curled the corner of his lip and furrowed his brow. But she knew him; he wouldn’t stop at being a sympathetic shoulder. He would want to do something about it. “I can’t do that to you, Varric. It’s too much,” she said shaking her head. “I can’t tell you and then expect you not to act on it.”

“Here’s a thought: you could tell me and let me help,” he said gruffly. “Bianca’s been bored with all this sitting around since we got back to Kirkwall anyway. Say the word and we’ll be right there with you. I’ll even walk through the creepy demon-mirror, if that’s what you need.”

It sounded nice. Varric, Merrill, Hawke, and Fenris. Maybe even call in the troops from Skyhold. They could all wait for Mythal in the Temple together. Make a proper last stand of it. Could Mythal stop them all by herself? But the reality was that Mythal wouldn’t be by herself. With a tug of Ahrue’s leash, she would fight for Mythal against her will, slaughtering her friends at the behest of her god. If Ahrue asked Varric and his friends for help, they would get as far as Enansal’nan before the Sentinels and Ahrue fell upon them in a deadly ambush. She could see the attack play out so vividly in her mind’s eye that she was certain it was more than an idle imagining; Mythal was giving her fair warning.

“I appreciate the offer,” she said weakly, pushing the visions of his death at her hands from her mind. “But when I say this is something Solas and I must do alone, I’m not speaking figuratively, exaggerating, or being stubborn. You can’t help. You really, really can’t.”

“Shit,” he said shaking his head. “Do you have to say it all ominous and mysterious like that?” He moved in closer and searched her face. “Just, tell me one thing: you gonna make it through this in one piece?” His voice was low and tense as he braced himself for her answer.

She laughed wryly. “I’ll live, Varric. But I don’t think I’ve been in one piece in all the time you’ve known me. Everything that has happened since I left my clan—maybe even before then—has felt like a slow shattering of myself. And just when I think I can’t break any more, something new starts chipping away at me.” She frowned and tightened her fingers around the quilt beneath her hands, trying to find some comfort and grounding in the texture of the fabric and the taut stitching.
“I may lose Solas to all of this… maybe more. Maybe everything.”

“You think he’s going to leave? Again?” Varric said, his neck muscles tightening.

She shook her head and shut her eyes. “I think it’s very likely that he’ll die. I don’t believe it. I can’t believe it. But… if I’m being entirely honest with myself, we are completely stuck. He’ll die, and I’m the only one who will ever understand why. And it will break me.” Ahrue blinked away the tears that were building, and Varric’s expression softened. “But I’ll keep living. I’ll build a life among the broken in Enansal’nan, and maybe we’ll endure together, those of us cursed to follow the path of sorrow.”

“Ahrue, I…” Varric started, but he couldn’t find the words to follow. He shook his head helplessly. “Shit. All of that was the opposite of reassuring, you know.”

“I know,” she said, feeling guilty that she couldn’t alleviate his worry.

“And it’s really worth it? You can’t just walk away and leave it to Solas?”

“It is. I can’t. And even if I could, I wouldn’t.” She remembered seeing his deepest fear etched in the stone of the fade graveyard: Dying alone. If he must die for this, at least she could save him from having his worst fears realized. “He shouldn’t have to face this alone. He thought he had to. It’s why he left: he thought to spare me all of this.”

Varric snorted. “So what you’re saying is that I’ve been an ass to him for no good reason?”

Ahrue smiled. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Still, I should probably put things right. I don’t want to leave things… you know.”

Ahrue nodded. She knew. If Solas was going to die for some cause worth dying for, Varric didn’t want him to do so thinking he had no friends in the world. “I think he’s reading in the library.”

“Yeah,” said Varric, and he started to walk toward the door when Ahrue’s letter to Dorian, still sitting unfinished on the writing desk, caught his eye. “Catching up with your correspondence?” he
asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I just keep imagining Dorian drinking himself into a stupor in some tavern in Tevinter, blaming himself, maybe doing something stupid, because of the lie that I’m dead. I hate that,” she said. “But I can’t find the words to make it right.”

Varric looked down at the words “Dear Dorian.” He scratched the stubble on his jaw. “Actually, what you got here is plenty. I can finish it up and send it his way. He’ll recognize your handwriting, but no one else who might intercept it will. I’ll add my condolences and something about your death ‘meaning something’ because at least now the continued Venatori threat is being taken seriously. If he’s half as smart as he thinks he is, he’ll put two and two together. Safest way to go about it.”

Ahrue smiled brightly. “Ma serannas. That will be perfect.” Safer for her while still putting things right with Dorian.

Varric shrugged. “Not a problem.” He frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“It just occurred to me that I’ll have to delay publication on The Herald’s Tale. You showing up like this has really messed with my tragic ending. Real tear-jerker. My editor is gonna be pissed.”

She smiled sardonically. “Hold off on your rewrite. You may yet get your tragic ending.”

-x-

Merrill and Varric saw Solas and Ahrue to the Eluvian. It was an easier goodbye than what Ahrue had endured months before at Skyhold. While she was less optimistic concerning what lay ahead for them, she was comforted by the fact that she was not striking out alone this time and the belief that she would see these people again. If everything went as planned, in just a month, Ahrue would be stepping back through that mirror—with or without Solas—to see Merrill jump in surprise and delight at the arrival of her unexpected houseguest. Ahrue would seek out Varric who would rise slowly from his writing desk upon seeing her step into his room, his face reflecting her own feelings back at her, be they relief or grief.
“I guess this is goodbye again,” Varric said, avoiding eye contact as he hooked his thumbs over his belt and rocked on his heels. She was reminded of the night she’d tried to sneak out of Skyhold, only to find him sitting at the hearth, forcing the goodbye on her that she’d thought to avoid.

“For a while,’’ she said softly. “I’ll be back soon to help you fill in the details for your book’s ending.”

“Make it a good one,’’ he said, looking in Solas’ direction. “Tragedies may sit well with critics, but I’ve always wanted to get the chance to end a story with a bold and trite ‘happily ever after.’ I might just be famous enough to get away with it, too.”

Ahrue smiled. “We’ll do our best.” She hugged him, breathing in the smells of ale, ink, and the oils he used to maintain Bianca and the soft shine of his leather boots. His head just beneath her clavicle, he too breathed deeply and she imagined him absorbing the details of her, perhaps to faithfully recreate the scene in text later, or just to commit to memory his friend who—despite Ahrue’s assurances—he still feared he might lose.

“Yeah, you better,” he said, voice barely audible.

The moment Ahrue and Varric broke their embrace, Merrill wrapped her arms around Ahrue. “Promise me you’ll take me to Enansal’nan when you’re finished at the temple, Lethallan!” said Merrill, her face nuzzled in Ahrue’s neck. “Please, promise.”

“I promise, Merrill. I’ll be back before you know it, and we’ll go to Enansal’nan together.” Maybe Merrill too could find a home there, apart from humans and Dalish who had cast her aside.

To their side, Varric and Solas were bidding each other a somewhat cooler farewell. After a moment’s hesitation, Varric extended his hand. “Be careful out there, Chuckles.”

Solas nodded and took his hand. “For what it is worth, I regret and collateral damage caused to you as a result of my departure. You have been a good friend to myself and Ahrue and were there for her when… when I was not. For that, you will always have my gratitude.” His voice caught slightly as he spoke, no doubt recalling all Varric and Ahrue had told him of her encounter with Despair. She had largely forgiven him for his deception and absence, but the shame was yet heavy in his tone as he edged the topic. She took some satisfaction in that.

“Don’t worry about it,’’ said Varric with a sigh. “Just try not to let it happen again. Stormy is going
to need you, not to mention the nugget.”

Ahrue cocked an eyebrow at his affectionate translation of her name. “Stormy? You speak Elvish now?”

Varric jerked his head in Merrill’s direction. “Daisy told me what ‘Ahrue’ meant back when I first told her about you. It fits, and seeing as I never gave you a nickname, and I can’t really call you ‘Inquisitor’ anymore, I thought I’d try it out.” He grinned sheepishly. “Too much?”

“I’m not sure it counts as a nickname if you’re just translating my name into Common,” Ahrue said, wrinkling her nose.

Solas smiled. “Keep trying, Varric. I’m sure something will come to you eventually.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Merrill said dryly. “It’s been ages and he still hasn’t come up with a name for Hawke or Aveline.”

Varric gave her a half grin. “She’s right. Some folks always seem to exceed their names. Others don’t.” The jab seemed to go over Merrill’s head, while Solas smiled thinly. “I’ll keep working at it,” Varric assured her.

Ahrue shrugged. “Just as long as you don’t call me ‘Herald,’ I’m content.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Though I’ll have to change the title of my book.”

After one more round of goodbyes, Ahrue and Solas approached the mirror. He waved his hand in front of it and spoke the key-phrase. The surface of the mirror rippled and shimmered like iridescent oil. Solas turned to her. “Are you ready?” he asked.

She nodded, and with a final wave to her friends, she stepped through.

The Crossroads were beyond quiet. As Solas and Ahrue stood side by side, the only sounds were those of their breath and heartbeats, both of which seemed uncommonly loud in the absence of all other noise. Rows of blackened mirrors stretched before them and behind them, and strangely
spherical trees dotted the flat and barren landscape.

Solas turned slowly in place, searching for the mirror that would link them back to Enansal’nan. Ahrue too glanced around and spotted it first, shimmering forward of their position. “There,” she said pointing, her voice reverberating despite her soft tone. Solas looked in the direction of her outstretched hand and nodded. Wordlessly they set out for the Eluvian.

After a few paces, Ahrue felt Solas’ fingertips brush the back of her hand, sending a pleasant warmth climbing her arm. She shuddered slightly and saw him respond with a self-satisfied grin out of the side of her vision. Still walking forward, he grasped her hand and brought her fingers to his lips for a soft kiss. Again her body heated in ecstatic responsiveness to his touch. These days it didn’t take much to send her blood racing in waves of wanting. And he derived too much entertainment from subtly building her desire throughout the day until she could barely dare to speak for fear that a moan might escape her lips in place of words.

Ahrue stepped through the Eluvian to Enansal’nan, feeling another rush of titillation as the cool charge of magic danced across her skin. The veil was thin in the forest sanctuary, barely thicker than it had been in the Crossroads, and the beauty of this place took her breath away, just as it had before. Solas stepped through behind her. He tousled her short hair and kissed the nape of her neck softly, whispering against her skin his breath warm: “Vir lasa arla, ma vhenan.” We are home, my heart.

We are home.

-x-

Everything was sliding into place. The letters of support had been coming in from all over Thedas since Ahrue’s death became a matter of public record. There was also an outpouring of gratitude from the would-be targets of Venatori agents, nobles saved by the Inquisition’s investigation and warnings. With the revelation that the snakes were coiled so close, the nobility suddenly found themselves taking the Venatori threat very seriously. Promises of troops, resources, and political support came from Orlais, Ferelden, the Free Marches, and Nevarra. Despite the weakened state of the Inquisition, the carefully fostered relations with other powers in Thedas bore fruit, and Leliana smiled more frequently over the past few weeks as she poured over the incoming letters and felt the world shift to follow her will.

-x-

Dear Leliana,
First, allow me to express my deepest condolences over the loss of Ahrue Lavellan. We only met briefly (and I wasn’t exactly in a warm and cuddly mood at the time), but she seemed like a compassionate and brave woman. She deserved better, and I have no doubt that all of Thedas feels the blow of her loss. Well, obviously not Tevinter, or Par Vollen (is Par Vollen technically even part of Thedas?), and I’m not sure where Nevarra and Antiva stand… but, you know, the good parts of Thedas will miss her, and sod the rest. This was a strike against more than just the Herald, more than just the Inquisition, and know that Ferelden stands with you against the Venatori.

Speaking of which: MAKER’S BREATH, this is the second time you’ve saved me from being assassinated in my own castle! I need to have a word with the seneschal in charge of hiring. Clearly I need to be clearer with him that listing ‘assassin’ or ‘spy’ as prior occupation is a red flag. Funny, I could swear I’ve had this conversation with someone else before…

Anyway, Ferelden and myself, personally, are in your debt, the Inquisition’s debt, and the Herald’s debt. My armies are yours, should you need them.

Your (deeply indebted) Royal such and such,

Alistair

-x-

Lady Nightingale,

I write to you on behalf of Empress Celene and myself to express our sincere condolences regarding the death of the Herald. While our interactions were brief and sullied by suspicion and the usurpers’ betrayal, the Herald’s actions that night saved Celene, the Empire, and set our hearts on the path of healing. Every moment of happiness we enjoy is owed to her.

While the humans of Orlais may be divided on their support of Lavellan (there are many who hold her in contempt on the basis of race alone, and Gaspard yet has his loyalists even as his corpse festers), the elves of Orlais recognize that their new found liberties are due in no small part to her actions at the Winter Palace. She is no less their Champion than I, and they mourn her. I have heard whispers of bands of Dalish and City elves stalking the remaining Venatori across the Dales. Indeed our troops have found a number of corpses stabbed in the back with poisoned blades: a bloody tribute to her memory and sacrifice. While Celene finds the violence unseemly, we have agreed to permit these actions to continue; let the People have their private justice.

As for official justice, the Empress has issued a trade embargo of Tevinter until such time as the Archon takes sufficient action to eliminate the Venatori inside and outside their borders and extradites Halviana to Orlais for judgment and execution. Until these conditions have been met to our satisfaction, our terrestrial and maritime borders will be defended with the utmost vigilance, and any further actions by Venatori within Orlais will be regarded as acts of war to which the Imperium and the Archon will be held accountable.

In Solidarity,

Ambassador Briala

P.S. You were right about the spy. They have been dealt with. Personally.
Dearest Leliana,

With all the happenings of the past few weeks, I’m torn between the urges to kiss you or set you on fire. Distance saves you from each. I am beyond pleased that the Inquisition made such effective use of my Friend’s information. It was quite a sick thrill to sit back and watch as the Archon’s slaves dove off the piers into the Nocen Sea, pulling out the bodies discarded and weighed down by the Venatori. I believe the total reached seventeen, in addition to the four dead and two living victims found in the warehouse. What they were attempting to do with all that blood is still a mystery. If the Archon knows what Halviana was trying to accomplish, he’s keeping that bit of information to himself. Nothing ominous at all about that possibility.

Most of the victims pulled from the water were beyond recognition, but it serves our purposes well that Rilienus was positively identified by his weeping parents and wife. I don’t know whether to be moved by their grief or resent them for feeling it for a man they hadn’t truly accepted in life. The nobles and poor alike are united in their outrage. Anyone who has gone missing in recent years is being searched for among the dead. The Venatori are certainly not the innocuous figures they were a few short weeks ago. I expect a mass execution is on the horizon.

Of course the Archon was all too happy to make public the particulars of Rilienus’ death (a blow to Rilienus’ family that cuts far deeper than his murder, I expect). Half of Minrathous is positively abuzz with the scandal of his ‘perversions.’ ‘Perversions’ which I happen to know more than a few of them share, by the way. But no matter, that particular flavor of hypocrisy is a discussion for another day. The point is that it was enough to motivate the Archon to take action, and the evidence is piling up around Halviana’s feet. When paired with the rumblings of outrage and retaliation in the south and east, I expect the Imperium will be highly driven to make an example of Halviana and her Venatori.

So, bravo, and all that. You expertly used people across Thedas to achieve your ends (ends that I wholeheartedly support, mind you). And apparently I should count myself among the used. A very illuminating letter arrived from Varric a few days ago, that clarified this point for me. No lute has ever been played so expertly as you have played me, my dear. But, Maker’s breath, your fingers must be grotesquely calloused after all that plucking! Continue this way, and you may not be able to even feel the strings against your skin, before long.

I am very angry with you and incredibly grateful. So, thank you, and I hope all your lovely red hair falls out!

Cheers,

Dorian

Esteemed Lady Josephine Montilyet,
While we were surprised to receive your intelligence report regarding the activities of the minor extremist group calling themselves ‘the Venatori,’ we were pleased to see you act as the ally to Tevinter we always hoped you could be. I can assure you that our investigation into the extralegal activities of the deposed Magister Halviana was already well underway by the time we received your report. Though we appreciate the gesture, our completely capable investigators had already uncovered far more intelligence than your sources were able to bring to light. I can assure you, we are handling the issue expeditiously.

The Magisterium regrets whatever inconvenience the actions of Halviana and her followers has caused you. Their deplorable behavior in no way reflects the values or will of the Imperium. And although we grieve that one of your people was victimized by an agent of Halviana, her influence within the Imperium has been far more destructive. She will answer for her crimes according to our laws, as will her Venatori. You are welcome to try and punish those few agents who remain within your borders. Halviana is responsible for the murder of several citizens of the Imperium, including a close family friend of the Archon, so I can assure you that justice will be swift and final. For now, Halviana and her people are incarcerated in prisons of Minrathous and Qarinus, pending trial. We will, as a gesture of courtesy and friendship, be glad to keep you appraised of the proceedings. And if you wish to send a delegate to observe said proceedings, we would welcome them with the utmost hospitality.

Sincerely,

Ambassador Alessia Fernandi

-x-

The letters varied in tone and expressions of support, of course (and the missive from Ambassador Fernandi had even Josie practically spitting with anger), but taken together, they all amounted to victory for the Inquisition. At least for the time being. Leliana and Josephine agreed that the Archon would make good on his promise to deal with the Venatori and Halviana with swift finality. With powers from the surrounding nations vowing allegiance to the Inquisition in this matter, the Magisterium was indeed highly motivated to use Halviana’s trial and punishment as a means of restoring international favor and trade. Fernandi’s bluster was just a maneuver for control over the situation to avoid losing face any further than they already had. And the Inquisition was happy to grant them this concession. It was in fact better than extradition if Tevinter painted themselves as united in enmity against the Venatori. If extradited, the Imperium would be inclined to represent themselves as victims of the Inquisition’s international bullying. So let them clean their own mess, Josephine thought to herself as she penned her response, trying much harder than Fernandi had to keep the passive aggression out of her tone.
The weeks dragged on as Ahrue and Solas made their return trip toward the Arbor Wilds. Time slowed to a crawl, and Ahrue almost wished for a Venatori attack if just to break up the monotony of walking and worrying over what was ahead. She reminded herself that there was no point in worry. Whatever she could do to control her fate, as well as that of her child and Solas, she had done. She had used her small amount of power as skillfully as was possible given the chains that bound her. She believed Solas had found her loophole, that he had at the very least made an attempt to work within it. Whether or not his efforts had succeeded was another matter. But he had tried. And that effort—successful or not—meant more to her than any words of love or ardent promises.

She tried not to worry, tried to accept that whatever would come of their efforts was out of her control. But still she obsessed. Every possible scenario played out in her mind. She saw herself losing Solas and losing the child in a thousand different ways. She imagined what it would feel like to have Mythal squirming in her womb as she stared down at the still form of her mate, his soul spent to stall the consequences of his mistake. Her chest would tighten as she saw herself crumple in her mind’s eye, defeated but alive, wrecked but free.

Ahrue wondered if Solas’ mind was taking similar turns. Was he imagining what it would feel like to have his soul drained from his body? Would it be fast or slow? Painless or agony? Did he yet hope that they may walk away from this victorious? Or was he certain of what end fate held for them, good or bad? Solas was quiet on the topic. In fact, he’d been quiet on virtually all topics, speaking briefly when he spoke at all. Whatever he felt about what was ahead, he kept to himself. But Ahrue could recognize the way tension stiffened his shoulders, and brought out the definition of his neck. Even his fingers carried emotion in their rigidity. He was unsettled or worried. Maybe afraid.

Ahrue’s anxiety would rise as she looked at him, taking his apparent emotions as a clue that what lay ahead was either uncertain or would have an undesirable outcome. Or, she considered, thinking back on the mysterious ritual Merrill had performed in Kirkwall, perhaps their path to victory was not all together palatable. Their victory would mean Mythal’s defeat, and whatever she had done to Ahrue, Solas had once called her a friend. She had once been someone who stood for justice even when it raised the ire of Elgar’nan. Either time had changed her or her actions now were somehow in service of a greater justice. The thought made Ahrue’s gut clench, and it needled her for days until she built up the courage to voice it.

They were camped just to the north of the Arbor Wilds. Ahrue was stoking the cooking fire, while Solas chopped vegetables and herbs they’d foraged for the evening meal. He moved stiffly and a pronounced frown settled on his mouth and eyes as he carefully cut a root. Ahrue chewed the inside of her cheek as she tried to find the right words to arrive gently at the questions that pressed on her.

Solas lifted his eyes from his task, no doubt sensing her staring at him. He cocked an eyebrow. “Is everything alright?” he asked.

She smiled wanly. “Alright as it can be, I suppose. I was about to ask you the same; you look like you’re deep in thought.”
He sighed and cut the root with a bit more force than he’d used with the previous slices. “We are almost to the Arbor Wilds. Perhaps another two days before we’ll arrive at the Temple of Mythal. I am beginning to regret having taken the shorter path through the Eluvian.”

Ahrue nodded. A longer path to the Temple would have granted them an additional week of time before confronting Mythal and restoring the Sanctum’s seal. But the building anxiety of every passing day was almost more than she could bear. If the wound was to be dealt, let the cut be swift. Of course, it was not her mortality that hung in the balance. If it was death Solas feared, she could not blame him for wanting a few more days, no matter the fatalistic pall that hung over his remaining time. “Are we sure Mythal will arrive when we do? It could be a long wait even after we get there.”

His nostrils flared lightly. “Perhaps. However, I expect that she is eager to see all things concluded. Her own mortality is no doubt pressing heavily on her, and she wishes to see the sanctum sealed as much as I do. And I’m certain she will be glad to have me permanently out of her way,” he said grimly. “I have meddled in her affairs more than she would prefer lately.”

Ahrue snorted. “Seems she should have anticipated that, given that she decided to meddle in yours first. Using your mate and your child… What did she expect you to do? Just let her have us freely?”

“She is not one to be sentimental. Nor, historically, am I. She may not have anticipated my caring as deeply as I do.” A sad smile lit his eyes as he cast a brief glance to Ahrue’s face. “She may have assumed that my loyalty to her would outweigh my connection to you and our offspring.” His face darkened. “She was wrong.”

“And what about you?” Ahrue asked, fixing the small cooking pot over the embers. “Are you surprised that her loyalty to you is outweighed by… what? Her fear of death? Her want for power?”

Solas paused his cutting motion and his hands rested limply against the stone he was using as a butcher’s block. “I am. I do not understand her need for the power of the bloodline.”

“You call it a ‘need’ not a ‘desire?’” she said, her neck tensing at the distinction.

He nodded. “Yes. She has spent millennia cultivating this bloodline and shown herself willing to go to any lengths to take the child. She believes it worth any cost or risk, it would seem. She must believe she needs it. Though it is possible that in her very effort to obtain the power of the bloodline, she has blurred desire with need to convince herself that the lengths to which she has gone have been worthwhile. After all, we have only been privy to her efforts of late. How many times, I wonder, has she meddled in the lives of the Elgar’vhen’s descendants in order to achieve these ends?”

Ahrue shivered, imagining herself in a long line of people coerced or manipulated by Mythal. Had her mother and father been played as she was? “And you really have no idea why she might go to such lengths?” she pressed.

“No. I’m sure she has some specific end in mind. Most likely a ritual of sorts that requires great power or even the specific power of our child’s bloodline.”

“Like a prophesy that only her blood can fulfil?”

He considered a moment. “Possibly. I can only guess.”

“But you do believe that whatever she has planned for the power of the bloodline is selfish, for her
own gain, not the greater good.”

Solas tilted his head and his eyes widened slightly. “Where does this question come from? Are you asking me if I think she is justified in using you this way? In taking our child?” He didn’t say, are you asking me if I am in league with Mythal? But Ahrue thought she detected that unspoken question in the hurt that edged his tone. And perhaps to some extent she was asking exactly that. He had used Ahrue in the past and justified it to himself as necessary. If Mythal had his loyalty, it would be simple enough to maneuver Ahrue into signing the contract and then claim that his inaction in preventing the possession was not by choice. She would be naïve not to doubt him given his history.

Ahrue put aside her suspicion, knowing that accusing Solas would accomplish nothing, and feeling sick from the shame it made roil in her gut. “According to legend,” she said plainly, trying to keep the emotion from her voice, “Mythal served justice above all else, sometimes through extreme action. Even when I met her in the fade, she spoke of putting right the betrayal of the world. Justice or vengeance consumes her still, drives her actions. Is it so strange to wonder if this,” she said pressing her hand to her distended belly, “is all in service of achieving some greater cause of justice?”

Solas relaxed some. “She no doubt believes that taking the child would serve justice or vengeance, her ability to distinguish between the two having been corrupted over time.” Solas scooped up the plants he had been cutting and brought them to the pot over the fire, carefully dropping them in the boiling water.

Ahrue stared at the hot stones that sizzled as specks of liquid from the pot hit them. “So, you do think it could be for the best for her to take the child.”

Solas moved to sit beside her and put a hand on her knee. “I did not say that. Mythal is not omnipotent. She is not a god or prophet. Just because she believes her actions to be in the service of justice does not mean they are.” His tone was warm and reminded her vaguely of being assured by her mother that the lake she was about to bathe in had no monsters in it, no matter what her cousin had told her. Solas turned her chin toward him, and his gaze brushed her face with tender sadness. “Even if I believed Mythal was committed to the service of justice, it would not matter. I see no justice in her control over you. And I will mourn the loss of our child whatever good or evil that loss serves.”

Ahrue nodded absently, trying not to dwell on the dark turn of his words. “You’ll barely have a chance to mourn it before you’ll be lost as well.”

He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “Do you want to believe that Mythal will use the child for some worthy purpose? Would it make it easier for you to believe that your suffering serves a greater end?”

Honestly it all depended on whether or not he could prevent Mythal from carrying out her plan. If Mythal succeeded, it might soften Ahrue’s pain if she could believe the pain was necessary to achieve a good end. On the other hand, if Solas had found a way to defeat Mythal, it would be better to see her only as an abomination gone mad, a cruel witch whose evil plan was thwarted by their actions. “I’m not sure,” she said. “I think if I just understood why Mythal was doing all of this, if it made some sense, whether or not that sense bent toward goodness, it would help me know what to feel.”

“The personal injury done to you by Mythal will not be lessened by her purpose, regardless of the utility of her intentions. Your body is not hers to use as she pleases, even if the geas technically makes that control possible. Using you can be rationalized, but not justified.”
Ahrue wondered if he recognized the hypocrisy of his words. Was this a lesson he had learned himself, or did he still believe that his own ends justified the means he used to achieve them? Had he ultimately chosen not to use another’s soul to renew the seal of the sanctum? If he was consistent with the belief he espoused, he could only sacrifice himself, as no other bodies were his to use as he pleased, no matter the nobility of his desired end. Or perhaps he was willing to sacrifice another and bear the weight of his wrong-doing, because the possible alternatives were unthinkable. Commit one wrong in order to prevent another.

“Regardless, hypothesizing the ethics of her actions is academic,” he said, leaning forward to stir the contents of the pot. “Mythal has elected not to make us privy to her design. Whatever her plans or rationale, we cannot know her mind.” His hand slowed in the stirring of the pot. “And our course of action, and the final outcome, has been set.”

Were his words for Mythal’s benefit or were they really trapped, prevented from straying from the path they now walked? “Do you regret the contract?” she asked, fearing his response.

He set the spoon on a stone by the fire and leaned back, rubbing his lower lip thoughtfully. “I regret that we were maneuvered into a position in which signing was the only reasonable option available to us. But, no, I do not regret signing the contract. You will have your freedom. At least that much has been gained.”

Ahrue frowned and winced inwardly. His words brushed on her regret, nestled like a shard of glass hiding in the sand, a secret shame she made every effort to keep buried. “I shouldn’t have drunk from the Well,” she said, her words thick as bile. “If I had let Morrigan drink…”

“No,” he said firmly. “The knowledge and power of the Well allowed you to become who you were always meant to be. It was your birthright. The extent of your potential and how you will make use of the power of the Vir’abelasan remains to be seen, but the cost of drinking from the Vir’abelasan does not diminish the value of its gift.”

Ahrue smirked. “Funny. I seem to remember a very angry lecture from you arguing that drinking was a mistake, that I should have let the witch have the Well.”

“I was wrong,” he said simply. “I thought to preserve a chance for you to find some peace in your life. I’d thought to protect you from the pain of the past those voices of the Well preserve. But even as I attempted to prevent you from drinking, I knew that you were better built for pain than peace. Asking you not to drink was asking you to be someone you are not, to disavow the extraordinary qualities that make you exceptional and unique. I would not see you so changed, although I have, on occasion wished you greater peace than the path you are destined to walk will allow.” He smiled absently, and an impish glimmer sparked in his eyes. “You are a… complicated person to care for.”

Ahrue guffawed. “I should think it’s no more complicated than caring for a millennia-old demi-god!”

He laughed. “I suppose not. We must both be drawn to complication.”

“Hmm. You might be right. Though to be fair, I thought you were just an apostate who liked sleeping in ruins and spent his spare time with spirits when we met. Seems positively simple in comparison…”

“True. Though you have surprised me as well, vhenan.” The smile faded from his face. “For all the pain Mythal has caused, I am grateful for the part she played in making you who you are and seeing to it that our paths would cross. Her final gift to me. I’m not certain whether she considers it
a cruelty or a kindness.”

“If she even considered how it would affect you at all. If she is so fixated on her goal, why would she care?”

“Because I am her friend. She is completely capable of acting selfishly even as she regrets what her actions cost me.”

Ahrue shook her head in disbelief. “After everything she’s done to us, you still call her a friend?”

“Consider it a habit of the heart: I am accustomed to caring for her, even when she proves undeserving. Not unlike how you may feel for your kin. Estrangement may complicate your feelings for them, but you still care for them, still, perhaps, hope for reconciliation, even as it seems unlikely or unwise.”

Ahrue’s throat tightened at the mention of her clan. Solas was right. Her feelings for her kin were complicated but not erased. And part of her wished that they or she could change enough to make it possible for them to be a part of her life again. “Mythal is like family to you,” she said nodding. She snorted as a thought occurred to her. “She is my family. Literally. That is very strange to me. I’m her descendent, her granddaughter, and still she puts me through all of this.”

“If it is any consolation, I suspect she is quite proud of the person you have become. And I believe she regrets what her actions have cost you as well.”

Ahrue recalled how the flash of anguish had briefly darkened Mythal’s face when Morrigan had made clear just how much she saw her as a destructive influence in the life of her and her son, the love that lit her eyes as she promised her grandson “no more bad dreams.” Did that depth of feeling make it crueler or kinder that she used them each so roughly? It reminded her of feeling the strike of her grandfather’s hand against her cheek. As a child it was easier to think him a loveless monster when he did such things. Believing that he cared for her even as he struck made her anger twist like rotten food in her gut. She wanted to hate him, but the tear that slid down his cheek as he turned from her made her own feelings bend toward forgiveness, even knowing he would strike again.

Solas stirred the pot again, a frown creasing his mouth and forehead. Ahrue realized that regardless of who emerged victorious from the sanctum, Solas would be injured by the encounter with Mythal. He would either kill someone he loved or die at her behest. No matter his actions, Solas would lose. Ahrue wanted to tell him she understood this. She also feared this. Solas believed the price exacted by the sanctum’s seal was rightly his to pay. Only his deep feelings for Ahrue and their child swayed him from this course, and lingering feelings for Mythal could well sway him to sacrifice himself after all, assuming he even had the option at this point. How much did his friendship with Mythal make his resolve flicker as they neared the end?

“We need you,” the words came shakily to her lips, an effort to convince him that he must live.

Solas’ eyes flitted to her face. “You will endure, regardless of my fate,” he said sadly.

She would; she had become an expert at enduring. As she’d told Varric, she would return to Enansal’nnan with or without Solas. She would make a life for herself among those who have endured across the ages, as elves had always endured since the fall of Arlathan. But she was tired of enduring, of watching her people endure greater and greater injustices, still feeling the wars that shuddered through their blood even though history marked the end of the battles centuries ago. “Not just me, Solas,” she said, her voice certain as carved stone. “The People need you. We have all endured long enough. Those elves in the alienage in Kirkwall, suffering under the apathy of humans who at best fail to see them. The Dalish, chased from every land we dare to dwell, our kin
killed for our crafts or just the audacity of our continuing to be in a world that prefers us as a myth of the past. The Sentinels who walk the ruins, haunted by the shadows and whispers of their dead world. We all need a rebellion. We need Fen’haril.”

The corner of his mouth twitched in a smile laced with sad appreciation for her faith in him. “They do not need me; they have you.”

“They should have us both. You to shake the foundations of the world, and me to find a sustainable order to shape the pieces into.” Ahrue the Mythal to Solas’ Fen’haril. “Together we can build a world where elves can thrive and shape their own destiny, where the past is honored with truth and caution instead of reverence and idealism. Isn’t that worth living for?” Her tone had gradually shifted from firm certainty to a trembling plea.

Solas looked away toward the horizon, his face an inscrutable mask. “It is. There is, in fact, nothing I want more. But my fate is sealed, vhenan. The fervor of our desire cannot change that.” He turned to her, eyes soft with compassion for the injury his words dealt her. “Have faith. You inspire all you meet; others will take up your cause, and some will have the flare for rebellion you seek.”

“I need Fen’haril!” she said, through gritted teeth, fury rising at his suggestion that she move on, that his role could be so easily filled by another.

“I was only ever Fanaril. A man. Not a god of rebellion or betrayal. Before Mythal inspired me, age tempered me, and the people elevated me, I was not unlike Sera: a rebellious child disgusted by the inequity that shaped the lives of myself and the people around me. Under your influence and given time, another could adopt the mantel of the Wolf.”

“You’re wrong,” she snapped. Panic was buzzing through her. She knew that he did not dare give any indication that he might survive his encounter with Mythal, but his tone, his words, his posture, and his expression all rang of defeat and farewell. He was giving her the words that might comfort her after he was dead. She tried to remember that he was a liar, had fooled her completely in the past, had fooled the Creators and the Seven. “If you’re trying to comfort me with all of this, you’re failing,” she said roughly.

“Ir abelas,” Solas responded in a low voice. “Perhaps silence would be easier.”

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The Temple of Mythal was empty. Even the dead bodies that had fallen during the battle here months ago had been cleared away, likely by the Sentinel before their departure. On this visit, there were no rituals to honor, no pondering over the relics, no arguments over the proper way to proceed. Ahrue led the way to the mirror, the path to it more familiar to the whispers that hissed in her mind than to Solas who’d only walked these halls three times before.

Ahrue walked at a clip in front of him, and he gave her some distance. She had been withdrawn since their conversation on the edge of the Wilds. She knew of course that he could not reveal the possibility of their victory; as long as she was under the geas, anything Ahrue heard or saw was under Mythal’s surveillance. Solas was obliged to leave Ahrue doubting in order to urge Mythal’s sense of assurance of her impending victory. Just the same, he felt cruel as he said the words that needed to be said, the words he would say if he was, in fact, moving onward to his death, even as hope and doubt played against one another in his private thoughts.

Ahrue took a deep breath as she pressed her hands against the great door in front of them, gathering the resolve necessary to push it open. Beyond the door was the Well and the broken Eluvian. Solas
put a hand on her back, feeling the slow rattling of her anxious breathing and the rapid tapping of her pulse. Solas too felt the energy of the moment gripping him. If Mythal was already beyond those doors awaiting their arrival, setting his trap would be impossible, and he would almost certainly fail in his efforts. If the room was empty, they yet had a chance.

Ahrue gathered her strength and pushed open the heavy door. They stepped into the giant chamber, each holding their breath on the hope that it was empty. Cautiously moving forward, craning their necks to search the room, they found no sign of Mythal. They had some time. Solas let the tension fall from his shoulders, but Ahrue still held herself stiffly braced for what would come.

They topped the narrow stairway, and Ahrue approached the empty pool where the waters of the Well of Sorrows had once glistened and hissed. Now they hissed within her, and she winced against the pain of it. Beyond the Well, the frame of the Eluvian stood empty but for a few shards still clinging to its edge. The rest of the mirror’s fragments lay in pieces at its base. Solas crouched and picked up a large shard, turning it over in his hand. Barely more than glass, now, the enchantment as broken as the surface.

“You’re sure you can fix it?” Ahrue asked.

He nodded. “It may take some hours, but the Arulin’holm should work.”

“Should work?” she asked dryly.

“There is always the possibility that something could go wrong. However, I do not anticipate any problems.”

“Can I help?” she said stepping to stand behind him.

“Yes. Even with the Arulin’holm, we must put the pieces in the proper order.”

“By hand?” she said, an exasperated growl under her voice.

“By hand. More or less. The enchantment may be broken, but the pieces still are magically imbued and will… desire wholeness. You should be able to sense their original order.

“Very well,” she said. She slowly lowered herself to the ground beside him with a grunt. She fidgeted for a while, trying to find a tolerable position for her body. She settled on swinging her legs to the right of her, putting her weight on her hip and the side of her thigh, with her left hand braced against the ground and her right hand free to manipulate the shards. She rarely complained about the discomfort caused by her pregnancy—now into her sixth month—but Solas recognized the frequent flaring of her nostrils and gritting of her teeth whenever her body didn’t move with the ease to which she was accustomed. She was eager to have her body freed from the child, and no doubt the next three months would be very long indeed. But at least once their business with Mythal was concluded she could be done with many of the demands travel placed on her body.

Solas shrugged off the straps of his rucksack and rummaged to the bottom of its contents to pull out the blade-shaped Arulin’holm while Ahrue carefully pulled several fragments of glass toward her. She shifted a few shards in front of her until the edges of two touched and she let out a little “Ah!” as she felt them hum in sympathy. “These two are a match,” she said, pushing the shards toward Solas.

He nodded, feeling the link between the pieces as she had. Grasping the Arulin’holm, he channeled his magic through the tool and felt it connect with the fragments. The Arulin’holm amplified the resonance between the pieces until the hum focused into a fine line of light that bound the jagged
imperfect edges of the pieces together seamlessly. They continued like this for hours: Ahrue sensing the connection points between pieces, and Solas binding them together with the Arulin’holm. When the completed portions grew sizeable, Solas would connect them to the frame. Eventually they assembled the final portion of the mirror.

Solas carefully grasped the last piece and set it into its place with one hand, while with the other hand, he sealed that piece, as he had the others, with the Arulin’holm to the rest of the mirror. But this time, as the thin band of light edged the rough rim of the glass, a shimmer of magic passed over the mirror’s surface, the pieces and the enchantment restored.

Ahrue shuddered, no doubt feeling the power of the artifact connecting to the fade. “It’s done then?” she asked darkly.

“Yes. I have only to unlock it.” Now his body echoed the shudder he had witnessed in Ahrue moments earlier. The end was approaching, and still no Mythal, still a chance for victory. He lifted his arm and moved his hand in slow circles, murmuring the key phrase in ancient Elvhen: “The Wolf approaches. Open the path to the last of the Uth’elgar’vhen. Let me pass beyond to the cage of sleep which now encloses them, safe from the world, the world safe from them.” An oily swirl of magic spread outward from the center in slow ripples.

Solas turned to Ahrue who was ashen and stone-still as she stared transfixed into the mirror’s non-reflective surface. She would have to remain here while Solas entered the outer sanctum if he was to lay their trap without Mythal seeing. “There is no need to enter yet, my heart,” he said putting his hand to her shoulder. “Mythal may yet be days away.”

Ahrue shook her head. “No. She’s close. Hours away. Maybe less.”

Solas’ gut seized. Time was running out. “You can sense her approaching?”

Ahrue swallowed hard. “Yes.” Her eyes closed, as she turned her senses away from the space around them. “It’s almost like hearing footfalls, a shudder through the fade with every step.”

The geas had likely sensitized her to Mythal in ways that exceeded his capacity. “One more night then,” he said, feeling Ahrue stiffen at his words. “She would not begrudge us that.”

“I suppose she wouldn’t,” Ahrue said, her voice deadened. “But what are we supposed to do with a last night? I can hardly relax enough to breathe, let alone… other things.”

He understood and felt much the same himself. The prospect of either dying and losing his child or killing his oldest friend quieted any desire that might otherwise have stirred him. Beyond that, he had said his goodbyes, said the words that he hoped Ahrue would carry with her should he fail. Nothing else needed to be said.

“We might sleep, at least,” he said. One more night of closeness, holding her head to his chest, feeling the firm roundness of her belly against him, the occasional movements of the child within. It had its appeal. He also happened to need Ahrue to sleep if he was to enter the mirror to prepare for Mythal’s arrival.

“I doubt I can sleep. Not with what’s ahead,” she said, eyes still fixed on the Eluvian.

“We have tonics,” he said. She grimaced slightly at the suggestion; in general, she preferred sleeplessness to the taste of the sleeping potion. “A lack of sleep will only make what is to come more difficult to endure,” he coaxed. “At your best, you have the strength to get past… anything.”

She snorted. “I doubt that any amount of sleep will make you dying and Mythal taking up residence
in my womb any easier,” she said, with a bluntness that made his throat constrict.

“For my peace of mind, then,” he said heavily, not wishing to argue, but feeling urgency building in his tightening chest.

She faced him with a withering look. “On one condition: promise me that you will not sacrifice yourself while I sleep.” Her expression softened somewhat as she looked into his tensed eyes. “I don’t want you to die alone,” she added unsteadily.

Solas was nearly undone by those words. A low breath shuddered deep within him. “I don’t…,” he stammered. “You being there would not change…”

She held up a halting hand, and moved in closer so their faces were almost touching. “That’s not why it matters. I want to be there to…” She took a deep breath to steady the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. “I want to be there,” she restated calmly. “Promise me you’ll let me be there.”

“I promise,” Solas said, with no intention of keeping his word. He was moved by the gesture, her willingness to be there to calm his fears of dying alone, no matter the personal pain it caused her. But the thought of sacrificing himself while she watched disturbed him so deeply that he doubted he would have the resolve to die so long as she stood by him. If he failed to trap Mythal and had to pay the cost himself, it would be easier if she was not nearby to witness his failure and his death. But he promised. If the worst came to pass, she may have to forgive him this one last lie. A small thing in comparison to all he’d done.

Ahrue nodded, and turned briefly back to the mirror. “Let’s find a place away from it; I’ll sleep easier in the side chamber.” She pointed toward a small doorway. “It’s where the head priest slept and worked,” she said absently, the Well supplying her those echoes of the past.

Solas followed her to the room. It was a simple chamber in comparison to the other parts of the Temple they had explored. No adornments on the walls, no statues, no elaborate tiling. There was a desk and a simple ironbark platform where the priest’s bed had been. It would be a suitable place to pass the night. Ahrue flicked her hand to light a torch mounted on the wall. The room was relatively free of cobwebs or dust. Perhaps Abelas had stayed here while the Sentinels had prepared to depart for Enansal’nan. Ahrue pressed her hands to the desk and winced. Solas suspected that the voices of the Well were quite powerful here, and touching the priest’s desk had likely pulled some memories to the surface.

She pulled away abruptly as if stung. “Let me have that sleeping potion,” she said gruffly. “This place… everything… it’s all too much.”

Solas nodded gratefully and handed her the requested potion.

Ahrue drank, gagging slightly as she forced herself to swallow the last of it. She put down the empty vial on the desk. “Solas…” she said hesitantly. “Before I fall asleep, I want to say that I don’t blame you. Mythal taking our child… I’d hoped we could find some way, some solution that could prevent it. Or at the very least, some way for you to survive. But… she had us, completely. And I can’t blame you for…” she was stumbling on her words a little, slurring slightly as the potion took rapid effect. “I love you, and you’ve messed up a lot—creators, you’ve messed up a lot—but Mythal… I understand… I hate it… but I understand.”

Solas caught her under the arm as she began to sway and guided her to her bedroll. He laid her down and stroked her hair as her eyes fluttered closed. He smiled softly and kissed her cheek. She hadn’t believed his promise. Her words were a farewell, an assurance that she did not hate him for
failing, in case he was already dead by the time she woke. “Ar lath ma,” he whispered to her before standing, picking up his bag, and making his way back to the mirror.

Standing before the shimmering Eluvian, he again whispered the key phrase and stepped through the surface into the outer sanctum. Solas shivered against the icy air that filled the chamber. He couldn’t remember why he’d made it so cold here when he’d sectioned off this portion of the Crossroads so many years ago. Maybe he’d realized even then this would never be a place for the warmth of kindness or forgiveness. Only cold cruelty and betrayal belonged here. Largely it resembled the rest of the Crossroads: stone trees with branches curved orb-like in a dead, yet somehow lively, pose, and broken tiled floors that gave the illusion of passing time even though this place was impervious to such things. Ahead the entrance to the Inner Sanctum rippled unsteadily with the waning enchantment that he had put in place so long ago.

It was all too familiar. Again he was faced with the burden of controlling the damage of a friend who’d lost herself to her lust for power and vengeance. Again he was preparing this place with a trap cloaked by a lie and his friend’s belief that he would not betray her, would not choose loyalty to another over her. But this time he would not be giving Mythal a peaceful slumber as he had the others; he would be killing her, forcing her to pay the penalty for his mistakes and choices. She should be prevented from taking the child—that much assured him of the justice of his actions—but using her soul to renew the seal was opportunistic, not justice. She would pay for both her mistakes and his, and the recognition of that fact was heavy as stone in his gut. But, when he considered the utility of his life compared to hers, he won out; the world yet had a use for him, for Fen’haril, while Mythal had become a destructive force, no longer the even-minded and just ruler she had once been. That role would be filled by another while Mythal’s life force preserved the peace of her sleeping kin.

Solas steeled himself. He reached into his rucksack and pulled out the stone Merrill had imbued with blood magic. He placed it on the ground, near the entrance to the Inner Sanctum. Using the edge of his wolf-bone pendant, he cut into his index finger, just deep enough to draw blood. Solas pressed his bleeding finger to the stone, leaving a crimson print on its moss-green surface. A rush of magic washed over him, generating a barrier that seemed to incase his senses in thick cotton batting. In fact, it was just his connection to the fade that was stifled by the enchantment. The enchantment then, as abruptly as it had triggered, rushed back into the stone. It was keyed now to his blood and would only trigger again when another approached it. When he next met Mythal in this place, they would be on equal footing, her magic as restricted by Merrill’s spell as his was by the contract.

Solas shouldered his bag again and stepped back through the Eluvian to pass the remainder of the night by Ahrue’s side, waiting and listening for Mythal’s approach.

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She came just before sunrise. Solas’ eyes snapped open as her presence disrupted the fade in the area. Soon he could hear her shoes clicking like talons against the tiled floor of the Eluvian’s chamber. Solas bent his neck forward to check on Ahrue who was nuzzled against him. He stroked her cheek, but she did not stir. The heavy dose of sleeping potion he had given her was still in effect. This simplified things.

Solas waited for the slight humming of the Eluvian to alert him that Mythal had passed through to the outer sanctum. He gently freed himself from Ahrue’s weight and gave her a parting kiss and a last lingering look before fixing the enchanted dagger to the back of his belt and cautiously making his way to the adjoining chamber. The surface of the Eluvian was still rippling like disturbed water from Mythal’s passage. He took a deep breath before stepping though.
Before him, Mythal ran her hand against the boundary of the stone’s area enchantment. She frowned, and the defeat and hurt in her expression cut him deeply. She understood it now: the betrayal that had burned him when they’d met in Enansal’nan and she’d refused to leave his family be, she now felt it returned upon her. She turned her head slightly, to catch him in the periphery of her vision.

“I knew you would come,” she said, her voice a rough and bleeding wound. “Though I had not expected so cruel a welcome. Some things never change, while others…” she trailed off, but he caught her meaning: he was still the trickster, but no longer her ally. “You should not have given your orb to Corypheus, Dread Wolf.” The truth of her words was indisputable, and the accusation did not escape him. The mistake was his, the price for that mistake should be his as well. It was as close as he expected her to come to a plea for her life; she saw his plan now, clearly, and knew just where his resolve was most vulnerable.

“I know,” he said in a voice strained by shame and grief. “I was too weak to unlock it after my slumber.” He approached her, his head and shoulders slumped under the weight of what he must do. “The failure was mine. I should pay the price. But the People. They need me.”

“Is that the story you tell yourself to stomach your decision?” she said, not managing to put her usual snide levity behind her words. “At least do me the final respect of being honest with me, Fen’harel. After millennia of removing yourself from the world, you have at last found yourself with a desire to live. Far more motivating than the fear of death, as far as self-preservation is concerned, wouldn’t you say?”

There was justice in her words. With the prospect of remaining with Ahrue, raising their child, and shaping a world together, Solas’ life mattered more to him than Mythal. He was not willing to die for her, even if his death was well-earned. Solas stepped into the circle of Merrill’s spell, further closing the distance between him and Mythal.

“Inventive,” Mythal said with an exhausted smirk, “using the power of the blood I sought against me. I truly believed you were making one last attempt at restoring the orb. I wonder what dear Merrill would say if you told her she had been the tool of Fen’harel, used to kill Mythal, the last of her gods? Yet another Dalish led astray by the Dread Wolf.”

He would not rise to the bait. Manipulating Merrill was perhaps morally grey, but his conscience could bear the burden of it. After all, the Dalish beliefs concerning their gods were further from the truth than his own characterization of Mythal as an abomination who had enslaved Ahrue and planned to possess their child. Besides, Mythal had done her fair share of manipulating the Dalish. Whatever shame he owed the Dalish for his use of Ahrue and Merrill, Mythal owed many times over. He moved in closer.

“This is how it ends then, Wolf? A friendship that spanned Ages, the fall of an Empire and the rise of another, five blights, the exalted marches, and what comes between us? A woman you’ve known for two winters? A child you didn’t want? That is what you betray me for?” Her painful appeals to their friendship tore at him, but still he approached. “I trusted you above all others, my Wolf! In the end, you were dearer to me than even my own mate! A brother to me in all but blood! Yet you betray me now?” Her voice had reached a frantic pitch as he continued to move in closer. “How many times did I side with you against the others? How many times did I alone stand with you when they called you traitor? When Elgar’nan was prepared to see you executed, did I not defend you, protect you, take his wrath upon myself to keep you alive? Yet you betray me now!”

“Yes,” he said, barely audibly, his face just inches from her own now. “I am so sorry.” He meant it. Whatever rage he’d felt at Mythal’s use of Ahrue, of him, and her plans to take their child, it all
left him in that moment as he looked upon the aged face of Mythal, so unlike the woman he had called friend so many years ago. She put on a show of rage, but it had no power behind it. She was at his mercy. He could only find room in his heart for pity and regret. This was not the way it was meant to be.

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The steam left Mythal’s rage as she looked into Fen’haril’s eyes, not the slavering eyes of the Dread Wolf or the impish eyes of the playful trickster. In that moment only grief, pity, and regret filled them, and Mythal knew she could not win. It was not cruelty that moved him, not vengeance; the blade that he grasped behind his back would wound him too. True, he would live, but he would carry this burden with him all his days, just as he carried the slumbering souls of those he’d locked away and the countless deaths of those killed by the blights. It didn’t count for much that her death would hurt him, but it did, in those final moments of looking into her dear Wolf’s strained eyes make sympathy spark in her own heart. She caressed his neck with as much warmth and grief as she had ever been capable, and he held her wrist tenderly with his right hand, each of them drawing strength from the other. “I am sorry as well, old friend,” she whispered, pressing her head to Solas’.

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Mythal didn’t fight him. With her magic stifled by the spell, she was simply a very old woman, while Solas’ body was still spry and strong, untouched by the passage of time. She recognized her defeat, and she accepted it. When he slipped the enchanted blade into her belly, she didn’t flinch, she just went limp as Merrill’s second spell triggered. Solas caught her before she fell, as the blade channeled her soul into his being, to be kept temporarily before he released it into the seal. Even a soul of her power could be contained for a short period without ill effects; it would take time for her to gain a foothold within him or to incorporate herself into his consciousness; it would take less time than she had.

He tenderly lowered her to the ground and pulled the blade free. Her life was instantly extinguished by the power of Merrill’s spell, the power of the blood that Mythal had been so desperate to control, but maybe partly by her own will as well. What purpose would fighting have served, except to deepen both of their misery? Perhaps if they did not stand within the field of the spell he would have sensed her death, would have felt the hold the contract had on him shatter. But as it was, it was a quiet thing.

Solas again pricked his finger on the wolf-bone pendant and pressed the bloody fingertip to the enchanted stone. The enchantment broke like a cool breeze through the outer sanctum. Still, Solas felt numb, as though his senses were yet stifled by the spell. He released Mythal gently, and rose unsteadily to his feet. The entrance to the Inner Sanctum stood before him. Just one more spell and it would be over.

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Ahrue woke with a start, a feeling deep within her that she had lost something. She turned to look at Solas, but found the place beside her empty. “Creators,” she whispered into the cold morning air, blood pounding in her ears. He had left in the night. She cursed him silently. He had promised, and she’d seen it in his eyes, the little flicker that made her doubt that he would keep his word. She stood up quickly, still feeling the effects of the sleeping potion she should never have agreed to drink. Ahrue stumbled from the room just in time to see Solas step out of the Eluvian. She fell to her knees at the sight of him: pale, trembling, but alive.

It took him a moment before he noticed her and moved quickly to her side. “Are you alright?” he asked, his voice and hands shaking lightly as he helped her to her feet.
She took a slow calming breath. “I thought Mythal had arrived while I slept. I thought you were dead.”

He guided her to an old stone bench. She sat, and he kneeled before her. “Mythal came,” he said softly.

Ahrue blanched, dread pulsing through her veins. “She’s here?” she breathed glancing in the direction of the Eluvian. He must have been coming to wake Ahrue while Mythal awaited within. “I… I suppose we should enter then.”

Solas shook his head. “No. Mythal is dead and the seal is restored. We can leave.”

Ahrue stared at him absently. “What?”

Solas managed a weak grin. “The loophole you worked into the contract was effective. Mythal was deceived.” Solas went on to tell her about the blood magic Marrill had worked to cast a powerful spell to prevent mages from drawing from the fade, and the second spell she had cast on the knife, to channel the soul of the victim into the one who dealt the blow. After those spells disarmed and killed Mythal, it had been a simple enough matter to repurpose the soul as a sacrifice to renew the seal.

“And I slept through it?” Ahrue asked, still unbelieving.

Solas nodded cautiously, perhaps uncertain from her tone if she was angry. “It was necessary. Had you been awake when I set the trap, Mythal would have been made aware of what I had planned.”

“Right. Right,” Ahrue said, feeling as though she was still dreaming. Mythal was dead. Solas was alive. Their child was safe. The seal was renewed. The geas was broken. The tension, anxiety, and fear accrued over the past few months remained, however. An aimless sort of terror that gripped her despite the apparent lack of danger.

It took months before Ahrue could convince herself that Mythal really was dead, despite the fact that she could sense that the geas no longer held her. She kept waking from nightmares that Mythal had managed to possess the child after all, or that she had somehow possessed Solas, or that she was not in fact dead, but biding her time for another opportunity to strike. It wasn’t until Ahrue held her newborn baby that she felt her fear of Mythal ease, displaced by more mundane fears concerning parenthood and the future of her child and the elves in general.

Solas too showed signs of wear and tear. Though he felt no fear that Mythal would reappear, he maintained a silence regarding what had passed between him and Mythal in the Outer Sanctum, and his face would darken whenever the memory was recalled. Ahrue respected his privacy in the matter, even though a detailed retelling of his encounter with Mythal may have allayed some of her fears concerning the witch’s return. He was mourning Mythal, in his own way, and however undeserving she was in Ahrue’s eyes, she understood that in her long life, Mythal had been many things to many people, including a friend to Fen’haril, and that deserved to be honored.

Ahrue and Solas made their home as they had planned in the forest sanctuary of Enansal’nan. Ghilan’era was born thirteen weeks after Mythal’s death. The Sentinels, who had not had an infant among them in millennia, delighted over the little one, and it seemed readily clear that Ghilan’era would be raised by a collective of Elvhen who were all deeply invested in the well-being and destiny of the child whose blood pulsed with the power of the Uth’elgar’vhen.

Chapter End Notes
That’s all folks! Thank you so much for reading this monster of a fan-fic (seriously, how did it get so long?!). Your “kudos,” comments, or just seeing your little numbers on my traffic stats really motivate me to keep writing. I am working on a sequel, Vir’lathan, that will take place five years after the conclusion of Sorrow and Solace. I’ll likely be publishing those chapters as part of Sorrow and Solace rather than as a separate fic, so stay tuned. Thank you again for reading! I’d love to hear what you thought of my story :)}
Vir'lathan: Emissary

Chapter Notes

Hello readers! Welcome to book 2 in my Sorrow and Solace series: Vir'lathan. Vir’lathan will continue Ahrue’s, Solas’, and Ghilan’era’s story, picking up some threads I left dangling in book 1. This begins five years after the end of book 1. It will likely be published at a slower pace as this book is still in process, and Sorrow and Solace was already completed when I started posting it. I hope you enjoy what is to come, and thank you for reading (and pretty please comment)!

He is good with her, Ahrue thought with a soft smile as she watched her mate tuck the blankets around their sleepy-eyed daughter. Ghilan’era, usually agreeable, transformed nightly into a stubborn pest, determine to stay awake and at her parents’ side. By the end of most days Ahrue lacked the patience for the nightly ritual of convincing the child to sleep, but Solas was unflappable and firm against little Era’s protests. Tonight, however, after thirty minutes of arguing with the child, even he looked near his breaking point.

“I promise you, da’len, we will return soon,” he said, his voice edged with exhaustion. “And Ilaran will take good care of you while we are away.”

“But why can’t I come?” Era pouted. “I want to meet the Dalish too.”

“We have been over this, da’vhenan,” he said in a measured tone. “Someday you will meet the Dalish, but not just yet.”

“When I’m older,” she huffed, repeating the words said to her countless times over the past two days.

Solas nodded. “When you are older.”

Era sat up and fixed Ahrue with all the sass her five years could muster. “Mamae gets to go!”

Ahrue laughed. Despite being Ghilan’era’s mother, with the exception of the four younger children who’d been born to the clan in the past five years, Ahrue was by far the closest to her daughter’s age of all the inhabitants of Enansal’nan. The thirty-year age difference between Ahrue and Era seemed small compared to the hundreds of years that separated Ahrue and the youngest sentinels. Era had on multiple occasions assumed that Ahrue, like herself, was a child to the clan, a belief not helped by Ilaran’s tendency to call them both da’len.

“Believe me, Era, if I could stay with you, I would,” Ahrue said, taking a seat at the foot of her daughter’s bed. “I’m sure our journey will be every moment awful without you.”

Era’s pout relaxed a little. “Can’t just one of you go? Like always?”

Ahrue and Solas exchanged a glance. In the past, when one of them had to leave the forest sanctuary for more than a few days, the other had remained at Enansal’nan. This would be their first extended journey leaving Ghilan’era entirely in the care of others. Ahrue felt selfish for taking Solas with her to see her clan. What was her need for support compared to her daughter’s sense of
“Not this time, child,” Solas said, his eyes still fixed lovingly on Ahrue’s face. Ahrue blushed in gratitude for his firm insistence that she should not have to face clan Lavellan alone. If not for his determination that Era could cope with their absence, she would likely have bent to their daughter’s wishes and agreed to have Solas remain behind while she made the journey alone. But he would not budge. They were going, and Era would be fine.

Ahrue wiggled Era’s foot through the blankets, and the child giggled and kicked, anticipating tickles would soon follow. Instead, Ahrue crawled up the bed and laid beside Era, holding her close. She tousled Era’s dark curly hair and kissed her freckled nose. “Mm, da’vhenan,” Ahrue said softly. “I know this is hard. For all of us.”

Era nodded, and her face looked primed to break into tears.

“But, I also know that all three of us are really good at doing hard things.”

“Yes,” Era said, on the cusp of a whimper.

“And when we’re away, and I think of you, I’ll know that you are here being brave and strong, and that will make me brave and strong.”

Era nodded, tears brimming over her wide, hazel eyes.

Ahrue smiled sadly and held Era tighter, her own tears catching in her throat. “It will be hard, and we’ll all be sad, but it’s okay that sometimes things are hard and sad.”

Era’s face was scrunched up and red fighting back intense feeling, but she nodded.

“In a few weeks, we’ll be back, and we can tell each other all about our adventures.”

Era nuzzled into her mother’s neck. “You’ll keep dadae safe?” she said in a choked voice.

Solas chuckled from his place beside the bed and rubbed his daughter’s back. “She always does, da’len.”

Era rolled to her back and took Solas’ and Ahrue’s hands in her own. “Stay with me until I’m dreaming?” she asked.

“Of course,” Ahrue said.

Solas climbed into bed so he and Ahrue laid on either side of Ghilan’era. Together they watched Era as she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

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Ahrue must have nodded off herself; the next thing she knew, Solas was standing next to her with his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him with bleary eyes, and he tilted his head toward the door. Ahrue sighed and gently disentangled herself from Era’s limbs. The child mumbled in her sleep but didn’t wake. On their way out of the room, Solas took the candle by the door, and Ahrue gave Era one last sad glance, missing her already.

They walked quietly up the winding stairs to their own chambers above Era’s. “I gave her sweet dreams,” Solas said quietly once they were in their room. “I expect she’ll rest deeply tonight. None of the usual nightmares.”
Ahrue smiled thinly. “Good. At least one of us will sleep well.”

Solas came close and stroked Ahrue’s cheek. “I can do the same for you, vhenan. A restless night will do you no good.”

“I suspect I have quite a few restless nights ahead.”

Solas nodded. “And I will be there through all of them. You are not alone in this.”

“I know. And it helps. But I still wonder if I’m doing the right thing.” Leaving Era, returning to her people, it felt wrong.

Solas smirked. “Would you like me to convince you again? Shall I repeat to you the speech you gave Era about being good at doing difficult things?”

Ahrue winced. “Maybe? Am I being silly?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I know this is trying. But, should you not go, I believe you will regret it.”

Ahrue snorted. “What a pep talk!”

His expression remained serious. “But, this is your last chance. And if you let it pass, your regret is certain.”

Ahrue turned from him and leaned against the window looking out over the enchanted glade. Solas knew her well. She would regret it if she didn’t return to her clan now. The letter had come three days before from Keeper Deshanna. Ahrue’s grandfather was nearing the end of his life, and wished to see her once more before his spirit returned to the Beyond. Ahrue had not seen her clan since she’d left for the Conclave nearly seven years before. Since then, she’d been changed by ancient magic twice over; led nations to restore order, end war, and stop Corypheus; been enthralled to Mythal and helped kill her; helped seal the sanctum of the Elvhen gods; joined a clan of Elvhen sentinels; and had a child with the Dread Wolf. And through all of it she’d learned more about the ancient Elvhen, their history, and their so-called gods than the Dalish had even brushed on.

Everything that had happened between her departure seven years ago and now put another rift between her and her clan. And the distance felt insurmountable. She hadn’t told them the bulk of what she’d been through, knowing that they wouldn’t understand. Her letters to them were brief, rare, and evasive. As far as clan Lavellan knew, Ahrue had had a child with a flat-ear and was living with her mate’s people in the forests of Orlais. The letter she’d reluctantly sent reporting Ghilan’era’s birth and her decision to not return to the clan had been answered with a brief note from her grandfather: “You bring shame to us all.”

Even before she’d left, things between Ahrue and her grandfather had not been easy. She was too curious, too rebellious. And he’d been harsh in his judgments of her. It was as though he’d always known she would abandon the ways of the Dalish and had resolved to punish her for it in advance. She still bore scars from some of their arguments.

But now he was dying, and he wanted to see her. She wasn’t sure why, except possibly that he wanted to respect Dalish tradition by observing the death rites with his closest kin. Ahrue hoped
that perhaps he also wished to make amends, so they might part ways with some measure of peace. But in truth, this was about more than her grandfather. The time had come for her to begin her role as Emissary.

She had spent the past five years teaching the Elvhen in Enansal’n’nan about the elves of today, their values and culture, the hardships they suffer, and, most importantly, why the elves and the Elvhen needed each other. The elves were desperate for a connection to the past, a connection severed by human imperialism and centuries of war and slavery. And the Elvhen needed a connection to the future, a way forward in a strange new world that had forgotten and buried Elvhenan long ago. It was time to heal the injury that had severed their peoples. Only together could they make a stand against their subjugation and abuse at the hands of humans. After a great deal of teaching, talking, and listening, the Sentinels had finally agreed that it was time to make themselves known to the elves, starting with the Dalish. Starting with clan Lavellan.

Ahrue was hesitant to make Lavellan the first. They were certainly enamored with the old ways, but their perception of Elvhen history and culture was badly distorted. There were truths that would be difficult, painful even, for them to accept. And it was entirely likely that they would think anything Ahrue told them a deception. If only they could all drink from the Vir’abelasan so they could come to understand everything and recognize the truth in her words, just as Ahrue had years ago. But alas, the Well was dry, and even if it hadn’t been drained, Abelas had stressed that most would have been driven mad by its power. Ahrue’s bloodline had primed her to use and understand the Well when no other living Elf could.

The power and memories of the Vir’abelasan sang through Ahrue shaping her into a bridge between the past a present, between Elvhen and elves. As Solas had repeated to her many times when she doubted herself, being the Emissary was a destiny that only she could fulfill, and every moment of her life, and the lives of her forebears, had prepared her for this path. She had the power and vision to remake the world.

“They may hate me for it, you know,” she said softly, still looking out the window over the gardens, streams, and tents that dotted the clearing below. “Their world may be built on lies and distorted memories, but it’s theirs. I’ll be taking it away from them.”

She heard Solas’ steps behind her as he came in close, kissed the back of her neck, and laced his arms around her waist. “You will be giving them a great gift. It may take time, just as it did with the Sentinels, but they will eventually realize that what you offer is worth more than any warped story or mangled tradition.”

She frowned, wanting to believe him. “I don’t know. The Dalish can be headstrong.”

“You don’t say,” he mumbled into her hair.

She whirled on him laughing. “Hey! I am not!”

He held up his hands in mock surrender and smiled impishly. “Only in the best possible way.”

“You, Fen’harel, would test the limits of even the most open-minded,” she said, giving him a shove. “Don’t expect my people to be as easy-going about it as I was.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You don’t actually plan on…”

“Creators, no!” Ahrue said, imagining what her clan would say if she told them that Solas, her mate and the father of her child, was the Dread Wolf. “Not for a long while anyway.”
Solas sat on the edge of the bed and folded his arms. “That is a relief. I’d rather not be hunted down and killed by your clan at our first meeting.”

Ahrue sauntered his way and straddled his legs. He stroked her thighs amorously, and she tilted his chin upward, so his dilated grey eyes met hers. “Yes, that’s more suitable for a second meeting,” she teased.

He laughed. “Yes. I believe you are correct.”
They woke early the next morning to set out on their trip. Not that there was much different between day or night in Enansal’nan; the glade was cloaked in perpetual moonlight, removed from the flow of time that paced the outside world. Only the enchanted orbs that hung from the trees like otherworldly fruit served to mark the passage of the days, glowing bright at midday and darkening during the night. At first, Ahrue had found the lack of sunlight disorienting, but as her body had become attuned to the rhythms of the place, the ebbs and flow of the fade that shimmered thinly on the edge of perception, she’d come to understand that forces other than time could drive the patterns of one’s life. Still, she was in the habit of keeping track of the days, months, seasons, and years, if for no other reason than to stay in contact with those friends whose lives were still preoccupied with the passage of time. It would be easy to lose decades in Enansal’nan and emerge to find that all her friends and family had crossed into the Beyond without her noticing. But Ahrue still cared for the outside world and the people in it. So she kept the days, even as Ilaran laughed at her for the absurdity of it, and she wrote to her friends often, remaining aware of their lives and them of hers. Some more than others.

Her recent letter to Kirkwall would have arrived by this point, and Merrill would be ready for Ahrue and Solas to emerge from the Eluvian. Ahrue felt lighter thinking of seeing her friends, wishing that visiting with them was the extent of her trip. But they would just be passing through on their way West to the Planasene forest where clan Lavellan was currently camped. The trip would take only a few days to reach Lavellan, but, depending on what exactly her grandfather wanted from her and how receptive her people were to her proposed accord, they may remain with the clan for weeks before heading back.

They’d packed the day before in hopes of making a quick get-away before Ghilan’era woke and slowed their departure with renewed tears and pleas to not go or to take her along. Part of Ahrue wanted to take her, show her daughter the people she had come from, introduce her to the family she’d never known. But she reminded herself that this would not likely be an entirely warm reunion. And though she was sure her people would not be cruel to the child, Era, sensitive as she was, would pick up on the tension and resentment, and perhaps a fair measure of distrust and grief, that Ahrue and her kin felt for one another. Era had grown up seeing her parents treated with love and respect, with exception of Varric’s occasional saltiness toward Solas. While Varric would gently explain to the little one that he was just teasing, and that he and her dad were old friends, any unkindness from clan Lavellan would not be so easily explained away. So Era would remain behind.

Ahrue and Solas gathered their traveling packs, bedrolls, and staves and headed quietly down the winding steps of their treetop abode. Ilaran and Abelas waited for them at the bottom.

“She’s still asleep,” Solas said to Ilaran. “Mercifully. I regret you may be in for a tantrum or two.”

Ilaran snorted. “Her fits barely qualify. I have handled more tantrums than there are stars in the sky, and I promise you, she is an easy child by comparison to most.”

“Thank you for watching her, Ilaran. It makes me easier knowing she is in your experienced hands,” Ahrue said, trying not to allow the anxiety that rattled her core show.

Ilaran waved off her gratitude. “It is nothing. da’len. She is a child of our clan, and her youth is a blessing to us all. Even when she’s fussing.”

Ahrue smiled. “Just the same, we are grateful.”
Abelas, whom Ahrue had come to think of as the clan’s Keeper, grasped her shoulder warmly. “It is you who have our gratitude, lethallan. I don’t expect returning to your kin will be easy. But if you can succeed…”

“She will,” Solas said.

Ahrue grimaced. “I… have my doubts. But it is worth the effort. And if they won’t join us, we’ll find others who will.”

Abelas nodded. “You have my complete confidence, Emissary.”

Ahrue groaned at the word. “Please, haven’t I spent enough of my life buried under titles?” First, Herald, Inquisitor, and now Emissary.

“You’ve earned the respect it carries, Da’len,” Ilaran said.

“Not yet, I haven’t.”

Abelas tilted his head to the side, looking at her quizzically. “But you have,” he said. “You’ve changed many hearts and minds among our clan; an accord with the elves would not be possible or even desired without you.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Believe it.”

Ahrue blushed. Even after five years in their company, she was not accustomed to the warmth of the affection and trust the Sentinels showed her. They’d accepted her as one of their own without reservation. She’s asked Abelas about it once, why she was different in their eyes from other elves.

He’d looked confounded. “Do you really not know?” he’d asked.

She’d shrugged. “I mean, I know the Vir’abelasan connects us…”

“It is more than that, lethallan. I could sense a difference in you from our first meeting.”

“Because of my bloodline? The anchor? Is that all it is?”

“I imagine that is part of it. But it goes beyond that. Your spirit…” He’d hesitated and closed his eyes. “Other elves, with my eyes shut, I could not tell them from shemlen. Whatever in them is Elvhen, that essence is silent, cold. But in you…” a peaceful smile had spread across his face. “Even when I first met you, I could sense in you a connection to the old songs. Quiet, certainly. But part of you felt and heard the world as we did. That part of you has only grown brighter in the time I’ve known you. And now…” he’d opened his eyes and took her hands in his. “Whoever raised you, it is no matter. You are as much an Elvhen as I. And that gives us all more hope than you could know.”

At first, it had felt strange to think of herself as one of the Elvhen, people she’d grown up thinking of as more mythical beasts than men and women. But living and working among them these five years, becoming acquainted and aligned with their way of seeing the world, she’d begun to recognize herself as, if not wholly one of them, then at least not entirely alien.

“I have been thinking,” Abelas said brightly, snapping Ahrue out of her reverie. “When you speak of us to clan Lavellan, do not call us ‘Sentinels.’”

Solas cocked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Abelas nodded, “Yes. We no longer live our lives bound to duty. Our vigil has ended.”
“Certainly,” Ahrue said. “But what should we call you then? Just Elvhen?”

“No. We are a clan. Dalish clans have names that unite them, and so should we.”

Ahrue smiled. “I think that’s a good idea. It might make you sound more approachable to the Dalish clans and other elves we contact. Do you have anything in mind for a clan name?”

“Enansal’vhen.” His eyes widened and grin spread, clearly pleased with the name he’d chosen and eager for their response.

“It is perfect, lethallin,” Ahrue said warmly, trying not to chuckle at his enthusiasm.

“Quite appropriate,” Solas agreed.

Abelas clapped them both on the back. “Excellent! Then you shall speak of us by that name. **Dareth shiral, lethallan la lethallin.** And Ahrue…” he circled to face her, grasping her forearms. His face turned serious, and she saw in him the man he’d been at their first meeting in the Temple of Mythal. “I hope you find some peace in this meeting. But if you do not, remember that we are your people now. And you matter far more to us than any prospective alliance.”

Ahrue stiffened. “Thank you, Abelas. But I doubt I’m in any real danger. And I will only tell them what I think they are ready to hear.” Her eyes flitted to Solas, knowing that some truths may never be sharable.

“Of course,” Abelas said. “But, from what you’ve said of your kin… You need not face them if…”

“No,” she interrupted. “I do.”

Abelas released her and bowed his head. “**Ma nuvenin.** You know your own heart.”

Solas placed a hand on the small of her back. “We should be on our way, vhenan. Era will not sleep for much longer.”

Ahrue nodded, drawing in a tense breath, feeling the inevitability of her voyage grip her. They said their goodbyes, including a quick visit to the halla herd to bid Dirtharavas farewell, and made their way to the Eluvian. The mirror was mounted on a stone dais. Bent silver branches were woven together in a lattice-work canopy overhead, a pattern replicated in the Eluvian’s delicate frame. The surface of the mirror shimmered in non-reflective whirls of violet, green, and grey.

“Are you ready?” Solas asked softly.

She snorted. “No. But we’re going anyway.”

He took her hand in his, squeezing twice for reassurance. “I will be there every step.”

She looked up at him, and her tense face softened. There was a time when she’d doubted him when he’d promised to stay. A time when she’d braced herself for losing him every day. He’d spent years proving to her that he would never abandon her again. And at last, she believed him. Without reservation. She squeezed his hand back. “**Ar lath ma,**” she said, appreciative that they had come through so much pain and struggling to be able to stand there together, sure of one another, content with the life they had built.

He smiled, and his eyes caressed her face. “**Ar lath ma, vhenan.**”

With a deep breath, Ahrue and Solas stepped forward, and passed through the surface of the
Eluvian.
Solas squinted his eyes against the darkness. They had traversed the Crossroads and stepped through a mirror that should have taken them to Merrill’s Eluvian in the Kirkwall alienage. But it was pitch black and a musty smell permeated the stale air.

A thump and the sound of heavy clattering objects sounded next to him. “Ah! Fenedhis!” Ahrue cursed.

Solas summoned an orb of veil fire in his palm, casting the room and his mate’s pained face in an eerie green glow. Ahrue was hopping on one foot, biting back further curses. “Are you alright?” Solas asked.

“Yes,” she grumbled. “I just stubbed my toes on this…” She looked around, and her expression morphed from pain to confusion. “Boxes?” she said, looking at the wooden crates she had apparently collided with. “Where the hell are we?”

Solas surveyed the room. They were in what appeared to be in a large closet. Boxes, chests of various sizes, some stacked furniture, and other assorted clutter filled the space around the mirror. “I’m… not sure.”

“Did we go through the right mirror?” she asked, her face twisted with confusion.

Solas turned to look at the mirror they’d come through. Its serpentine golden frame dimly reflected the green light. He shook his head. “That is Merrill’s Eluvian.”

“This isn’t Merrill’s house,” Ahrue said shaking her head. “I hope she’s…”

They each started at the sound of rapidly approaching footfalls and incoherent shouting. Solas gripped his staff and Ahrue’s hand tightened around the hilt of her spirit blade as they each oriented themselves toward the door and tensed for danger.

The footfalls were soon right outside the door. The knob jiggled but didn’t open. “Hurry!” a familiar voice shouted frantically. “They could be here any moment!”

“Easy, Daisy,” Varric said. “I’ve got all of Hawke’s keys right here. Now light the lantern so I can see what I’m doing.” The sound of a key bumping uselessly against the lock came through. “Nope. Not that one,” Varric said gruffly.

Ahrue laughed and they each relaxed at the sound of their friends’ voices.

A gasp came from the other side of the door. “Oh no!” Merrill said anxiously. “Ahrue! Solas! Is that you? Can you hear me?” It sounded as though her mouth was now pressed to the door jam. “I’m so sorry! It’s all my fault!”

“It’s okay, Merrill,” Ahrue called. “Take your time.”

“We’ll have you out in a jiffy,” Varric said, adding in a low grumble, “How many keys does this place need?”

After a couple minutes of Varric trying key after key on the door, the lock finally clicked. “Ah!” they all exclaimed at once, and the door swung open, revealing Varric looking deeply bemused and Merrill bouncing on the tips of her toes in a blend of excitement and anxiety.
Merrill launched herself at Ahrue, who was at that point the closest to the door, pinning her in a tight embrace. “Lethallan! I’m so sorry! I was so excited to see you, and then I couldn’t sleep, and then I did, but I slept too late! What you must think of me!”

Ahrue smirked. “It’s alright Merrill. We’re fine. We were only in here for a few minutes.”

Varric craned his neck, looking around the room. “The nugget isn’t lost in the mess is she?”

“Era remained in Enansal’nan,” Solas said, ignoring the twinge of guilt at leaving her behind. “She sends her love and…” Solas reached into his pack to fetch three rolled up drawings that Era had asked him to deliver to Varric, “…these.” He handed the pictures to Varric who grinned broadly as he unfurled and admired Era’s artwork.

Varric whistled through his teeth. “Kid’s got talent. Takes after her dad.”

Pride warmed Solas’ chest. Seeing his child develop interests and talents that they could share in together was a constant delight for both of them. Most days, he would take the time to sit with Era for an hour or so either drawing side-by-side or coaching her in the development of her craft. “She is an adept student,” he said proudly. “Eager to learn and improve. Her technique is already quite advanced for her age.”

Varric cleared his throat. “Technique, huh? Good to see you’re directing all that useless childish energy and joy into something…”

“Varric,” Ahrue warned, cutting Varric off, no doubt sensing Solas beginning to bristle at the dwarf’s judgment of his parenting. “Era loves coloring with her father, whether she’s learning about light and shadow or scribbling all over the walls.”

Varric held up his hands. “Fair enough.”

“No,” Ahrue said, holding Merrill’s hand. “Can we get out of here? Wherever ‘here’ is?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Varric said chuckling. “We had the Mirror moved to Hawke’s place. Thought it might be safer than in the alienage.” He stepped back from the doorway to allow the others to pass. “Also Hawke has all this extra space and a really big dog who could probably take down any demon or… whatever that might come through.”

Solas sighed. He’d assured Varric several times over that the mirror could not manifest demons, but the dwarf remained resolute in his fear of the magical passageway.

“This doesn’t look like Hawke’s home,” Ahrue said, looking around at the dimly lit hallway.

“It’s the cellar. Sorry. Someone forgot to tell us that you were coming. Hawke would have had it moved upstairs if she’d known.”

“I didn’t forget to tell you, Varric,” Merrill grumped. “I just forgot that I hadn’t told you yet.”

“An important distinction,” Solas said with a precariously straight face. “Regardless, it is no matter. Besides a few moments of confusion…”

“And some bruised toes…” Ahrue interjected in a low voice.

“We are no worse for wear,” he finished.

“Good,” Varric said. “We’d have felt really bad if we’d opened up the closet to find two skeletons
in a heap of clothes and… traveling gear.” As he said the word ‘gear,’ Varric halted and looked
them over curiously. “Uh… This is more than just a friendly visit, isn’t it?”

Ahrue, who had reached the stairs out of the cellar, pivoted on the second step. “Yes. We’re really
just passing through.”

Varric’s nostrils flared, and he rubbed the back of his neck, presumably easing the tension that built
there when he worried. “Passing through. Why do those words make me nervous?”

Solas clapped Varric on the back. “Oh, but think of the stories!” he teased as he walked past the
dwarf and up the stairs.

“You live in an enchanted glade with ancient immortal elves. There’s plenty of great story material
right there.”

He didn’t know the half of it. Ahrue had mercifully kept Solas’ true identity a secret over the
years. Their friends knew of Mythal, and the particular interest she’d had in Ghilan’era, and they
knew of the Sanctum that housed the old gods. But as far as Varric and Merrill were aware, Solas
was a descendent of the Wolf not Fen’harel himself. They’d been told that Ahrue and Solas had
pieced together knowledge of the Fade, Mythal, and their bloodline through dreams and the
Vir’abelasan. As it was, Merrill was still reluctant to look Solas in the eye, knowing the role they
had both played in the death of Mythal, even as she’d grudgingly granted the justice of their
actions. She also had come to treat Ghilan’era with a reverence that Ahrue had been unable to talk
her out of. To Merrill, the child was the closest thing to her people’s gods. And even knowing that
the Uth’elgar’vhen were more abomination than deity, the power of that bloodline—a power
Merrill knew very well—had sway over her.

When the group emerged from the cellar, Varric ushered them to the library where Hawke and her
mate Fenris sat reading, a large mabari panting by their feet. Hawke and Fenris each looked up,
Hawke with a smile, Fenris with a frown. “Oh good, they found you!” Hawke said brightly. “When
Merrill ran in here a few minutes ago screaming that you may be locked in cellar, I was worried.”

Varric tossed the ring of keys at Hawke, who snatched them deftly from the air. “With how many
keys you have, we’re lucky we got them out at all.”

“Well,” Hawke said, as the group took seats, “Every time Isabella breaks a lock, I get it replaced.
New lock, new key. Hence…” she jiggled the crowded keyring.

“You do know you don’t have to keep the old keys, right?” Varric teased.

Hawke shrugged. “I figure when I have enough, I could make… something out of them. You
know, if I feel crafty.”

“Oh!” Merrill exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “A necklace!”

Hawke tried not to smirk as she gestured in Merrill’s direction. “See? I could make a key necklace.
It will be the hottest new trend at the Spring Salon.”

Fenris seemed unimpressed. “I take this to mean that the blighted mirror is here. In the house,” he
said sternly.

“It’s not blighted,” Merrill said firmly. “I fixed…”

Hawke signaled for Merrill to stop before turning to Fenris, a placating smile on her face. “Fenris,
my heart, you said you were uncomfortable having such a powerful object in the alienage.”
“What I said,” Fenris snarled, “is that the blood mage couldn’t be trusted with it. I certainly didn’t mean that I wanted it here, and you know full well. We should have destroyed it.”

Solas shook his head and exhaled heavily. The man’s blood was thin as Sera’s. “As I have said, the Eluvian is no danger. It is simply a passageway.”

Fenris snorted. “A passageway that could lead to anywhere. Tevinter? This Sanctum of yours where ancient abominations are sleeping? What happens if they wake up?”

Hawke leaned close to Fenris and tenderly tucked a strand of white hair behind his ear. “Then I’ll be glad we’ll be the first line of defense.”

Fenris’ expression softened somewhat as he looked into Hawke’s eyes. “Wouldn’t it be better if there were no passageways at all?”

“Should we also destroy every road and dam all the rivers?” Ahrue asked evenly.

“Maybe not,” Varric said, rubbing the stubble on his jaw. “But roads and rivers don’t usually pass straight through demon town.”

“Ah!” Ahrue said with dangerous brightness. “Because when demons and Magisters decide not to use doors and punch their way through instead, things turn out so much better! Blights! Giant rifts in the sky! Let’s have more of those, please!”

“And you prefer to have an easy path for them? Leading right to your doorstep?” Fenris snapped. “Into your home? Where your daughter sleeps?”

Solas was losing patience. “The mirrors do not ‘pass through demon town,’” he said wearily. “Accessing the fade from the Crossroads is not simple. And most would lack the power to achieve it. Nor would it seem that the Magisters have access to a functioning Eluvian. If they did, I suspect we would all be under Corypheus’ heel by now. No special danger is posed by the Crossroads and the Eluvian.” He fixed Fenris with a gaze of steel. “And destroying what little remains of Elvhen culture is no way to mitigate the threat posed by those who seek to rupture the fade.”

Fenris glowered. “Elvhen culture is dead. I see no point in preserving its ashes.”

Ahrue folded her arms. “The dozens of Elvhen living in Enansal’n’an would disagree. As would most Dalish.”

Merrill nodded emphatically, clearly grateful to have addition voices on her side of the old argument.

“Look,” Varric said, “I’m not saying we should destroy the mirrors; I’m all for frequent visits from you and the nugget. But maybe there’s a more secure place for it than just locking it in a storage room?”

“Oh, come now, Varric,” Hawke said with a wink and a wicked smile. “What could possibly go wrong?”

Varric groaned. “And now we know it will.”

Hawke shrugged. “When does it not?”

Varric chuckled. “Oh, I think I remember a day last Tuesday when nothing went wrong.”
“Last Tuesday…” Merrill said dreamily. “Wasn’t that when the spiders…”

Varric snapped his fingers. “You’re right! Maybe it was a Wednesday.”

“And there’s my point,” Hawke said. “Whether it’s demons, Magisters, Qunari, Templars, ancient dark spawn, or giant spiders, we face it. And it always dies.”

“Corypheus,” Varric coughed.

Hawke rolled her eyes. “He eventually died. And again, that whole business had nothing to do with my keeping a magic mirror in my basement. So let’s call it settled, shall we?”

Fenris grumbled and Varric shrugged.

“Good,” Ahrue said tightly. “I really like not having to sail the waking sea every time I come north.”

“Mmm,” Solas agreed, remembering their awkward stay aboard the Siren’s Call years ago.

“Which reminds me,” Hawke said, “What brings you to my cellar on such a fine morning? I gather from your bags and bedrolls that you didn’t just pop over for brunch.”

Ahrue tensed, and Solas’ heart ached for her. Her people, and her grandfather in particular, remained a difficult subject for her to talk about, let alone face head on. She still had nightmares, mumbling the word harellan—kin traitor—in her sleep. “We are going to visit my clan,” she said flatly.

Varric’s brow furrowed. “Oh? It’s been a while since you last paid them a visit, hasn’t it?”

Ahrue inhaled slowly, which Solas recognized as an effort to calm her habitual irritability and personal questions. “I haven’t been to see them since I left nearly seven years ago. And we rarely correspond.”

Merrill, who had taken a seat next to Ahrue, reached out and squeezed her hand. She could relate to Ahrue’s struggle given her own excommunication from her clan.

“Then why visit them now?” Fenris asked, a gentler turn to his tone than usual.

Ahrue’s jaw tightened. She didn’t have much fondness for the surly elf, and what she could forgive as well-intentioned meddling in Varric felt intrusive from Fenris. “My grandfather is dying. He wished to see me.”

Fenris’ expression softened and his eyes drifted briefly to Hawke’s kind face. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Losing family, whatever difficulties remain between you, is not easy. I sympathize with your grief.”

Solas winced. He’d learned years ago to not press on Ahrue’s relationship with her kin. Fenris was trying to show sympathy, but Ahrue would see judgment there, a correction of her feelings, a suggestion that she should forgive, she should grieve.

Ahrue’s nostrils flared. “At the risk of sounding like a monster, I doubt I’ll grieve the man. I expect his death will be a relief. He has been unwilling to give me peace in life, so perhaps his death will bring some.”

To Solas’ surprise, Fenris nodded, his sympathetic gaze unchanged by Ahrue’s response. “I
understand,” he said gently. “I hope you find what you seek from his passing. Sometimes, that is all the resolution that can be had.”

Ahrue blushed, and the fire in her eyes faded. “Thank you,” she said softly. “I don’t know what to expect from this visit. Things have… not been easy between us for a very long time. I hope he wishes to make amends, but even then…”

Solas closed his eyes, recalling the scenes of abuse Ahrue dreamed of often, knowing that her mind had likely drifted there when her words had trailed off. How any person could treat a child in their care in such a way, Solas had never understood. And now that he was a father, he understood it less.

“If he hasn’t earned your forgiveness, then you owe him nothing,” Fenris said, leaning forward, forearms on his knees.

Hawke opened her mouth as if to speak, but closed it again with only a sigh and a barely perceptible shake of her head.

Ahrue picked up on it too, and her temper flared. “Do you have something to say?”

Hawke grimaced. “It… is your affair,” she said hesitantly. “And I don’t pretend to understand what happened between you. But, I’ve lost a lot of people, some of whom I was not on the best of terms with. And, in my experience, death doesn’t bring peace when there hasn’t been a resolution, it just… fester.”

Solas was inclined to agree, and he would wager that he had far more experience with difficult loss than the rest of them had collectively. Further, he believed, in her heart, Ahrue agreed with Hawke too. If she thought otherwise they would not be travelling to meet clan Lavellan.

An uncomfortable silence had fallen over the room. Each party seemed caught up in memories of their own loss. As Solas counted his own dead, he felt suddenly very old and tired. He hoped for better for Ahrue.
Vir'lathan: Era

Ghilan’era hated dreaming, dreaded laying her head down each night and shutting her eyes to enter the place of nightmares. Every evening her father would promise that he would keep her safe, that nothing could harm her in the fade with him watching over her slumber. But she knew his words, spoken with utter love and sincerity, wouldn’t mean much once sleep took her. He would let her be devoured by darkness, drown in a sea of screaming souls, be bled dry by a shemlen witch, watch the world be burned to the ground by dragons, and any other number of disturbing fancies that pulled at her mind night after night. Her father would let it happen again and again because, no matter what events befall her while she slept, she would wake up alive and safe. Only demons could move him to act on her behalf.

Each morning he would talk to her about her dreams at length, encourage her to draw or paint what she’d seen and talk through what had troubled her. Again, he’d assure her that she was safe, that these were not demons that tormented her. Still, sometimes she would tell him of a dream and his eyes would narrow, and his head would cock ever so slightly. He would look at her paintings and ask darkly, “This is what you saw?”

More often than not, he seemed most unsettled by dreams that were not terrifying, scenes that played out like a story, Era inhabiting the role of a key player who was not her. She minded these dreams less than the nightmares as they were usually mundane. They felt familiar, and comfortable as often as not. But when she woke, and those dreams were exposed to the harsh light of day, they felt confusing and alienating, involved people she’d never known, and yet somehow knew, and things she couldn’t understand, and yet did. Those kinds of dreams happened with increasing regularity. A couple weeks before, after Era had told Solas of one such dream, he’d gone to fetch her mother and asked Era to tell the story again.

She had begun hesitantly. “I was a man named Shawan. I loved a woman named Cri.”

Ahrue shuddered at the names and looked over at the picture Era had painted of Cri: short red hair, green eyes, and a full figure, dressed in blue. “This is Cri?” she asked in a low voice.

“Yes,” Era said, fidgeting. She felt as though she had said something wrong.

Solas nodded his head toward Era. “Tell her the rest, Da’len,” he said gently.

Era’s stomach turned. “I don’t want to,” she said, blushing. She hadn’t liked telling him about the dream in the first place. The thought of telling it again in light of her parents’ reaction, made her want to hide and cry.

“Very well,” Solas said. He turned to Ahrue. “Cri was already bonded to another man, but she was with child. Shawan’s child,” he recounted, paraphrasing Era’s telling. “The pair, presuming violent retribution should Cri’s bondmate discover the truth, fled here to Enansal’nan. They planned to have the child here in safety before finding another home far from Cri’s mate.”

“Rotris,” Era added softly, her stomach dropping remembering the large man with sunlit hair.

“Far from Rotris,” Solas amended. “When Cri’s labor quickened, neither she nor the child survived.”

Era bit back tears at the memory of the blood and her grief—or Shawan’s grief—holding her dying beloved in her arms.
Ahrue swallowed hard, her neck and jaw tense at Solas’ retelling of the story.

“After Cri’s death,” Solas continued, “Shawan left Enansal’nan for the Temple of Mythal to devote himself to her service.”

Ahrue turned to Era and gave her a false smile. “Little bird, why don’t you go play in the gardens?”

“Yes Mamae,” she said with a frown. She knew her parents wanted to continue discussing her and her dream without her, so she left their chamber, but her curiosity prevented her from going much further than the threshold. She hid just out of her parents’ sight, listening closely to their conversation.

Solas was the first to speak. “It struck me as more than a nightmare. And when she mentioned the Temple of Mythal…”

Ahrue sighed. “You’re right. Shawan’s memories are part of the Vir’abelasan. It all happened exactly as you said. I used to think of Cri often while I was pregnant, especially in the days leading up to Era’s birth.” She sighed again, heavier than before. “It’s not a bad likeness,” she said, and Era imagined she was gesturing toward her painting of Cri.

“She is affected by the Well, then,” Solas said heavily.

Era scrunched her face in worried confusion. The Well? The Vir’abelasan? The name conjured feelings of both familiarity and fear, but she wasn’t sure why.

“Are there other explanations?” Ahrue said wryly. “I’d prefer to entertain possibilities that aren’t entirely my fault.”

“You could not have known,” said Solas gently. “And even if you had, it is not necessarily such a bad thing. It gives her a connection to you, a connection to the past, and through that past, a connection to myself and the Sentinels. Her heritage. The Geas is gone. Mythal is gone. The Vir’abelasan may be a burden, but it is also a gift. I know you believe that.”

Ahrue snorted. “For myself, sure. For our daughter…?”

“It is a gift,” he said with firm warmth. “And no one can better help her understand that gift and help her manage the burden of it than you.”

“I think she has enough gifts without it. Everything Mythal said about Era, the bloodline…” she trailed off, and Era clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle a gasp at what her mother’s statement implied. Mythal had been an absent presence Era’s whole life. She knew the Sentinels had once been disciples of Mythal, and she often heard the name spoken in whispers. But no one would say much of her when Era asked directly. Even her father, whom Era could usually depend on to be frank with her, would say little about Mythal beyond that she was once a good leader but had been twisted by a thirst for vengeance and power and had to be slain lest she harm more innocents. He would say nothing further of her, not even to tell Era how Mythal was slain or by whom. Ilaran, offering little more, had told her that Mythal was killed long ago, but would give no more details. When Ilaran said “long ago,” it usually meant hundreds or thousands of years, but having heard her mother talk as though she’d spoken to Mythal about Era… It was all very unsettling.

“Nothing changes,” Solas said. “This has confirmed our suspicions, nothing more.”

“Right. It’s just… It wasn’t easy for me, Solas.”
“I know, vhenan,” He said tenderly. “However, you might remember that you were going through a great deal at the time, much more than just the whispers of the Well. Era’s experience will not be the same as yours. The Well does not bind her.”

More confusion. It sounded as though whatever the Well was, it had something to do with her mother too. The word “bind” made Era’s skin prickle. She’d heard it used to describe capturing spirits cruelly, or wrapping an injury with cloth. Was her father’s use of the word here tender or cruel? Violent or healing?

Ahrue and Solas were quiet for a while and Era imagined that they were embracing, maybe looking out the window trying to catch sight of her in the garden. Ahrue eventually broke the silence. “Why now?”

“It has likely been influencing her all along,” said Solas simply. “How else would you explain how quickly she learns and understands. Even for an exceptionally bright child, she is... surprising. The memories of the Well may inform her actions and thoughts on an intuitive level, even if the specificity of those memories has eluded her. As to why the memories of the Well are surfacing with such clarity now, it may signal that her magic is beginning to burgeon, bringing the Vir’abelasan into greater focus.”

“Creators, Fen! She’s five!” Ahrue said incredulously. “It can’t already be her magic.”

“She is Elvhen and of an exceptionally powerful bloodline. It would not be surprising if her magic came soon. Fortunately, she has many adept teachers to guide her in its use.”

There was mention of the bloodline again. Era investigated the blue veins that ran through her forearms. They looked ordinary to her, not powerful or exceptional at all. And what did her blood have to do with magic or the Well, let alone Mythal? Her head spun with questions that she was bursting to ask, but she pinched her lips together and kept her quiet.

“And if she’s a somniari?” Ahrue pressed. That word Era knew. It was the kind of mage her father was, giving him the rare ability to control the fade and talk to spirits without needing to summon them. The thought of being able to control dreams and bend her nightmares with her will quickened Era’s pulse and brought a shaky grin to her mouth.

“Hmm... That would have its own challenges. But I dare say, in that event, having the Dread Wolf as her father may have its advantages. However, those abilities would likely surface well after her magic showed itself. It need not be a concern to trouble ourselves with at the moment”

“And you’re sure no demons have tried...” The thrill Era had felt moments before faded with the chilling mention of demons.

“I’m certain,” he said, halting Ahrue, and giving Era some small relief. “Besides, her magic, even if beginning to burgeon, will not be sufficient to draw demons for some time. Her nightmares are the effect of the Well and an active imagination, not the doing of malevolent spirits. She is safe, vhenan.”

Ahrue groaned softly. “I wish I could convince myself of that.” So did Era, as she silently begged her parents to put her at ease.

“Your worry is understandable. I share it.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel a lot better,” Ahrue said flatly.

“My apologies. I mean only that there is much we do not yet understand. And what lies ahead is
difficult to predict. Mythal said much, and what of it is true remains to be seen, as does the entirety of her meaning. She was never one to be direct. But at least we know now that Era is affected by the Well, and that knowledge can only help us.’’

“And what do we tell Era?’’

“Ah. Perhaps it would be best not to burden her with such things.’’

“Old habits, Solas?’’ said Ahrue with a slight edge.

“Must you put it that way?’’ Solas snapped. “Is it so wrong to wish to protect our daughter from frightening truths. Especially when we know so little and will hardly be able to answer her questions or put her fears at ease?’’

Ahrue sighed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. This is all just… bringing up a lot for me. Coping with strange power, not knowing what it is, while the people you love most hide the truth from you? It’s familiar, and… it feels wrong to lie to Era about what’s happening to her.’’

“And what would you have us tell her?’’ he asked sharply.

There was a stretch of tense silence before Ahrue answered him. “We should tell her about the Well. It’s a part of her, and it’s affecting her now.’’

“Oh? Shall we detail how the Vir’abelasan affected you? How Mythal wielded its geas against you? Against her? Do you suppose that will help her nightmares cease, envisioning the witch possessing her and enslaving her mother?’’

Era cried softly at her parents’ raised voices and the terrifying hints of their words. Enslaving her mother? Possessing her? When her father had told her that Mythal was killed to prevent her from harming innocents, she’d never once guessed that she and her mother were numbered among them.

“Stop it,’’ Ahrue bit back, more irritated than angry. “We can pare it down for her, so she can understand the source of the dreams and know… know that she isn’t alone, without including details of a history that, as you said, is no longer relevant. The rest can wait until she’s older.’’

Now it was her father’s turn to take a thoughtful silence. “If you believe it is best,’’ he said resignedly after a time, “I defer to your judgment.’’

“Well you don’t have to be such a pompous ass about it.’’

“I disagree,’’ he said simply.

“Ah! So you do have to be a pompous ass?’’

“Very witty,’’ he said wryly.

“I thought so.’’

“What I meant was, despite disagreeing with you on whether or not Era should be told of the Vir’abelasan, I grant that you have insight that I lack. As such, I trust your judgment more than my own in this matter,’’ Solas said, the harshness of his tone lifting. “I am however somewhat bitter about admitting it, hence the note of arrogance you detected.’’

“It’s alright,’’ Ahrue said brightly. “I’ve gotten used to it.’’

Solas chuckled. “And glad I am to hear it. Now when do we speak to Era?’’
“Tonight. I need to think a bit about what exactly to tell her now and what can wait a few years.”

Era jumped at the sound of footfalls coming up the stairs. She quickly sidled along the wall into a shadow, hoping to be invisible to the approaching person lest they tell her parents that she was eavesdropping. Fena, a woman who worked closely with Ahrue, soon appeared, climbing the stairs to Era’s family’s chambers. Fena spotted Era immediately and paused to smile and wave at the little girl. Era grinned and brought a finger to her lips to signal secrecy. With any luck Fena would think that Era was hiding as a part of a game and not betray her presence to Ahrue and Solas. Fena mirrored Era’s smile and gesture, putting the child at ease, before continuing into her parent’s quarters.

While Fena began talking to Ahrue about some business concerning a message that had arrived, Era took the opportunity to sneak down the stairs and into the garden where her parents had told her to go in the first place. In the garden, crouching out of sight in a patch of prophet’s laurel, Era tried to wrap her mind around all she’d overheard. All the talk of burdens, bloodlines, Mythal, a geas, and surfacing memories, it all felt eerily familiar and entirely terrifying.

Era considered what questions she would ask when her parents talked to her about the Well. What was the Vir’abelasan? What was a geas? And what did these things have to do with her, her mother, and Mythal? And could they make it stop? From each of those questions sprang a dozen more, and the more she thought of what she didn’t know, what she wanted to know, and what she was afraid to know, the more she came to dread the conversation ahead, wishing she had never sat outside her parents’ door, wishing she had never told her father about the dream of Cri and Shawan.

The dreaded conversation never came. When Ahrue and Solas tucked Era into bed that night, she was braced to find out more about the Vir’abelasan. They looked braced themselves. Ahrue in particular was shaken and tense. But when she took Era’s hands in her own and said that they needed to tell her something, it didn’t have anything to do with the Well or Mythal.

“Da’len, your father and I are going to have to go on a journey,” she said, her voice sounding strained.

Era furrowed her brow. “Where?”

“To see the Dalish. The clan I grew up in.”

Ahrue rarely spoke of her clan, and would seldom entertain many questions about that part of her life. The chance to find out about them, this family she’d never known, sent a thrill of excitement through Era. “I get to meet them?” she asked brightly, eyes wide and pleading.

“No,” Solas said. “Perhaps when you are older.”

They gave few details about the reason for their journey. Mostly they explained how long they would be gone, and tried to put her at ease regarding their safety and hers. In the time before their departure, the Vir’abelasan was not mentioned. Era couldn’t ask directly or she would be found out for snooping. But when she listened at their door in hopes of gleaning more, she only overheard additional talk of their journey to the Free Marches, her mother’s clan, and her role as Emissary. Her own struggles had gotten lost in the more pressing concern of clan Lavellan. Whatever the Vir’abelasan or Well was, it could apparently wait until Ahrue and Solas returned.

Meanwhile, Era’s dreams intensified nightly, until memories and nightmares flowed together in a seamless circuit of terror.
Ahrue knelt on the ground, digging at the roots of the spindleweed she’d spotted while refilling her waterskin at a nearby stream. The cool damp earth felt soothing against her fingers which were running a little hotter than usual, her mana quick to burn whenever she was angry or anxious. The contact with the wet dirt and the smooth, fragile roots calmed her some and eased the knot of dread in her stomach as she poured all her focus into this task of unearthing the weed without snapping the roots.

Solas’ shadow fell on her as he tutted. “You are stalling. Again.”

“Just give me a minute,” she said, ignoring his accusation. “I’m gathering spindleweed.”

“Yes,” Solas said in a teasing tone. “As I said, you are stalling. We have no present use for spindleweed, nor for the embrium you gathered early.”

She pivoted to look up at him, squinting and shielding her eyes against the sun. “That’s precisely the best time to gather them. If we wait until we need them and then have to go searching for the supplies, we could end up in dire straits.”

Solas smirked. “And you expect winter to arrive months early that we should suddenly find ourselves in desperate need of spindleweed for cold tonics?”

Ahrue fought the smile that teased at the corners of her lips. “Or we could be sucked into a portal and find ourselves suddenly transported and freezing in the far south.”

“Very possibly! And, as spindleweed doesn’t grow in cold climbs, it is sensible to gather it before such an event befalls us. Most wise of you, vhenan.”

Ahrue turned back to the plant and resumed her task, grateful that her mate was here to bring some lightness to her heavy heart. Solas crouched beside her and began working on uprooting a second plant, humoring her. “Don’t break the roots,” she warned. “They are the most potent part of the weed.”

He nodded, slowing his pace to be more gentle with the unearthing process. “You are aware that eventually we will run out of weeds to dig up,” he said nudging her with his elbow.

Ahrue looked around. “I don’t know, Solas. Thedas is a pretty big place…”

He chuckled. “True enough. You could make it your life’s work to gather all the spindleweed.”

“Better tell Abelas. Do you think he’ll take it well?”

“Hmm,” he said in mock thoughtfulness. “I’m certain he’ll be disappointed, but I think we all knew you were meant for grander things than rebuilding the Elvhen.”

Ahrue laughed as she freed the last of the weed’s roots from the soil and began helping Solas dig up his plant, a task which he quickly surrendered to her more practiced hands.

“In all seriousness,” he said softly, “we are quite near clan Lavellan. Would it not be better to have it done with than to continue to prolong the anticipation?”

Ahrue sighed and sat back on her heels. “I’m not stalling,” she said. “I’m… just trying to not fall
apart. The closer we get, the more anxious I feel. I haven’t felt this worried since Mythal.”

Solas frowned, likely recalling those dark days himself. “Whatever they think of you, they cannot change the remarkable person you are.” He put a hand on her shoulder and gently turned her face to meet his tender gaze. “Nor can they change how loved and respected you are by your friends, your new clan, and your family. Please remember that.”

Ahrue smiled softly and took a deep, comforting breath. “Thank you, Fen. I know. I just…” Her words dropped off as her head swam with all the fraught memories and feelings that mention of her clan always brought to mind. She closed her eyes. “I don’t want to do this.”

Solas opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by a shout in the distance. Ahrue’s head snapped to the West to see two figures silhouetted in sunlight, one waving emphatically while a second jumped up and down. She couldn’t recognize who they were from this distance, with the sun so bright behind them, but she knew with sickening dread that they were from clan Lavellan. Likely hunters or scouts on patrol.

Nausea rose in Ahrue’s throat at the sight of her clan’s people. “I’m going to be sick,” she said, hurriedly turning away and getting on all fours before emptying her stomach in the grass.

Solas rubbed her back as Ahrue continued to retch. “They are running this way,” he said gently. “I am here for you, vhenan, whatever comes.”

Ahrue spat bile from her mouth, and took a swig from the water skin Solas offered her. “Creators,” she said shakily. “Can we make a break for it?”

He rose and put a supporting hand under her right elbow to help her to her feet. “I think not. But it will be alright.” Ahrue wasn’t convinced.

As the two elves drew closer, Ahrue recognized them as her cousins Pelev and Hari, twins twelve years Ahrue’s juniors. The sight of them was something of a relief; there were far worse people who might have greeted them. Pelev and Hari were playful and energetic, happiest telling wild stories to the younger children. Of course, that had been years ago, before they were even full adults by clan custom. Who knew what sort of people they had grown into. Ahrue waved and shouldered her rucksack, trying to focus on breathing.

Pelev launched herself at Ahrue, almost knocking her off her feet in an enthusiastic embrace, shouting, “Lethallan! Lethallan!” Hari, a few steps behind, smiled broadly and waited until her sister released Ahrue before taking her turn with a more reserved hug.

Ahrue laughed nervously, searching for what to say. “Were you two always this tall?”

“Were you always this muscly?” said Pelev brightly, pinching the bicep of Ahrue’s sword arm. “You look more like a hunter than a mage!”

“And you brought a friend,” Hari said in what sounded like forced brightness, casting Solas a thin smile.

“Uh, yes,” Ahrue said, stomach swimming with anxiety again. “This is Solas, my mate.”

“Figured,” Hari said, crossing her arms.

“Solas these are my cousins, Hari and Pelev.”

Solas bowed his head. “Anderan atish’an. It is a pleasure to meet you both.”
“He’s older than I expected,” Pelev whispered loudly as she clung to Ahrue’s arm.

Ahrue chuckled at the understatement. “Youth is not everything, lethallan.”

“Did you boot?” Pelev said, wrinkling her nose and craning her neck to see the puddle of vomit behind them.

Ahrue grimaced. “Yes. Just a little nervous about coming home.”

Hari nodded. “It’s… going to be interesting,” she said, looking Solas up and down.

Pelev tugged on Ahrue’s arm. “You didn’t bring the baby!” she whined.

“Ahrue chuckled. “You didn’t bring the baby!” she whined.

“She’s not a baby anymore,” Ahrue said, smiling. “Too big to carry, but still too young to walk this far.” She didn’t add that she didn’t want Era to witness the clan disrespecting her father and mother. “Maybe in a few years.”

Pelev continued to pout, resting her head on Ahrue’s shoulder while Hari signaled for the group to follow her westward toward the clan’s camp. “What’s she look like?” Pelev asked dreamily.

“Very much like her mother,” Solas said warmly, his chest puffing up in pride as it always did when he spoke of their daughter.

“But with her father’s freckles, only darker. And his curls,” she added grinning, “though you can’t tell looking at him now.” She winked at Solas who smiled impishly, and the knot in her stomach loosened some.

“Daaw!” Pelev crooned. “She sounds adorable.”

Ahrue snorted. “And does she ever know it, too! Whenever she is in trouble, she flashes those big hazel eyes and a winning pout and waits for your heart to melt.”

Hari snorted. “Sounds like Pelev,” she said, elbowing her sister.

Pelev blew a raspberry at Hari. “You’re just jealous that I’m the cute one.”

The twins were virtually identical, with the same straight dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin, and lithe build. Only their body language—Pelev gangly and Hari lumbering—set them apart from one another at first glance. “Are you two hunters now?” Ahrue asked.

Hari nodded. “I passed the trials four years ago.” Her serious expression broke in a satisfied grin. “It took Pelev a second try after that.”

Pelev released Ahrue to give her sister a shove. “I had a cold on my first try, you ass!” While Hari laughed and regained her footing, Pelev stuck her nose in the air and smoothed her hair. “The bear I took down for my trials was half again as big as Hari’s.”

“You can say that as many times as you like,” Hari teased back. “The repeating doesn’t make it any less of a lie.”

Ahrue laughed, put at ease by the familiar bickering of her cousins. They hadn’t changed much. “Take it easy, you two,” she said, poking Pelev in the ribs. “I don’t want to have to tell the Keeper on you.”

Pelev threw her head back laughing. “Creators! You should! I miss Deshanna’s lectures. She hasn’t given us a good verbal lashing in ages.”
“Speak for yourself,” Hari grumped. “She gave me an earful just yesterday for talking too loud outside grandfather’s aravel.”

At the mention of her grandfather, the knot in Ahrue’s stomach returned. The others felt it too, as both Pelev’s and Hari’s smiles faded and their steps slowed. “How is he?” Ahrue asked in a low voice.

Pelev shrugged. “Don’t see him hardly at all. Not much for company these days; just stays in his aravel sleeping. Keeper says it won’t be long, though.”

Hari kicked a loose stone and frowned. “I’m surprised you came.”

Ahrue nodded. “I’m surprised he asked me to. He wasn’t kind in his letter responding to Era’s birth. And then I heard nothing from him until now.”

Hari’s and Pelev’s gazes both flited to Solas who tensed with understanding. “Yeah,” said Hari. “He wasn’t exactly happy to find out what you’d been up to. But I think he blames Deshanna more than you.”

Ahrue’s eyes widened. “Deshanna? Why does he blame her? For sending me to the Conclave?”

Pelev bit her lip and nodded. “We don’t know much about it. But they argued a lot after you first left and again when you sent word about your little one.”

Ahrue frowned. She’d never known her grandfather and Deshanna to argue. They were siblings, inseparably close, and the oldest members of the clan in addition to being its leaders—Deshanna the Keeper and Hawel the Hahren. Solas gave her a meaningful glance and she knew he was recalling what Mythal had suggested to him years ago, that she had convinced or coerced Deshanna into sending Ahrue to the Conclave. Did her grandfather know of this? Did he resent his sister for sending her away at the behest of a Shemlen witch? She wondered, not for the first time, how much Deshanna had known of what Mythal had planned for Ahrue and Era, and now she contemplated whether Hawel also had been aware of the witch’s plans for her. She shuddered at the thought of her family knowingly surrendering her to be Mythal’s puppet.

“It doesn’t make any sense to anyone,” said Hari with a bitter edge to her voice. “I mean, you’re the First. Of course she sent you. Who else was she supposed to trust to keep an eye on the shems? Besides, you’re the one who decided to get friendly with a flat ear. No offense.”

“Indeed,” Solas grumbled.

“Stop it, Hari,” Pelev snapped. “If you’d ever been in love, you’d understand.”

Hari laughed too hard. “Is that what you call that googly-eyed whatever you’ve got going with Kes? Love?”

Pelev blushed. “Quit being such a child.”

Ahrue’s skin heated at Hari’s judgment of her. Not overly harsh, but present. She suspected that most of the clan would show similar hints of disapproval while not being overtly hateful or cruel. Solas, on the other hand, was likely to be the target of blatant disrespect and even disgust, just as Hari was showing him now. Even Pelev wasn’t exactly being welcoming to him; her defense was of Ahrue, not of Solas. Neither of the twins had returned his greeting, and they had barely acknowledged his presence since. Ahrue wasn’t sure how to respond to this unkind treatment, nor was she certain that acknowledging it wouldn’t make it worse.
“Honestly, Rue,” said Hari, ignoring her sister and steering the conversation back to Ahrue, “I think without you around for Hawel to place the blame where it belonged, grandfather just picked the next best target.”

Solas visibly tensed, his nostrils flared. Ahrue understood his feelings, anger raising in sympathy. Hari, aware of how Ahrue had been Hawel’s favorite “target” for years, no doubt knew the implications of her words. And Solas fumed on Ahrue’s behalf. But they’d talked about this, and she’d told him to bite his tongue no matter what people said to her or about her. Him jumping to her defense would not help her or their cause any.

“Okay, Hari,” Ahrue said flatly, hoping to defuse Solas’ anger. “I get it; you think I should be held accountable for my choices. But don’t expect me to believe that he struck Deshanna.”

“How!” Pelev barked. “Can you imagine? One smack and boom he’s grandpa jerky!”

Hari snorted. “No, he didn’t hit her or anything like that. But if you think your leaving didn’t have costs for those of us who stayed, you’re kidding yourself.” She stepped into Ahrue’s path and faced her, skin flushed, bringing the group to a stop. “Look,” Hari continued, “I’m glad you’re back, but… you left us. Really left us. And for what? To play hero for the shems and screw some flat ear sideways? That’s not okay, Rue. So, don’t act like it is.”

Ahrue’s jaw tensed. “I didn’t mean to give the impression that I took my actions lightly, Hari,” she said in a controlled tone. “I don’t expect a warm welcome or forgiveness. But if I can heal some wounds while I’m here, I’d like to try.”

Hari folded her arms and nodded. “I’d like that too.”

“Good!” Pelev said, taking Ahrue’s hand and dragging her around Hari and onward. “Now that stupid mess is out of the way, let’s get home. I’m starving.”

Hari followed behind and draped herself on her sister’s back. “You just want to see Keeeessssss. Kissy Kes.” She continued making kissing noises in Pelev’s ear, while her sister swatted her away and pinched her.

The sound of Pelev and Hari bickering faded into white noise, as Ahrue walked numbly toward her clan’s camp, unsure what kind of welcome to expect from the rest of her people or what answers she might find. She did want to make things right between her and the clan while she was there, but she was not willing to concede that her actions amounted to betrayal. If that was what Hari and the others expected of her, they would be sorely disappointed.
Vir'lathan: Lavellan

It wasn’t long before Ahrue spotted the smoke from the clan’s cooking fires curling through the trees. Her steps halted, as though her feet had frozen to the ground, unable to take another step. This could not go well. How could it? Even before she’d found out the truth of Solas she’d known she could never come back, that her clan could never accept her choices, nor could she even accept their values. She had barely fit in before the Conclave. Now she was utterly alien to them. If they called her harellan, how could she object when she had quite literally brought the Dread Wolf to their doorstep? If she told them the whole truth, they wouldn’t simply shun her, they would kill her. Or try, at least. Returning was beyond a bad idea. What had ever made her think otherwise?

Pelev squeezed her hand. “It will be okay,” she said gently.

“Will it?” Ahrue said with a nervous chuckle.

Pelev smiled weakly and tugged her forward. “Come on.”

Ahrue took a deep breath and nodded, not at all comforted by Pelev’s non-answer. The four continued on their path through the trees with Hari several paces ahead. A few minutes further down the path, two guards stepped out from the coverage of the trees to greet them. One she recognized as Rohna, a hunter a few years older than Ahrue. The other was a stranger, a young man with brown hair and vallaslin honoring June, Master of Crafts. Hari whispered something to Rohna who looked at Solas with narrowed eyes, fingers tight on her ironbark bow, before taking a few steps to close the distance between her and Ahrue.

Rohna smiled thinly. “So you’ve returned?” she said, sounding almost amused.

Ahrue returned her thin smile. “For a visit. I’ll try not to overstay my welcome.”

Rohna nodded, chewing on her tongue. “Well, the Keeper and Hahren Hawel want you here, and that’s good enough for me.”

Ahrue’s neck ached with the tension that built by the minute. “Okay,” she said in as unaffected a tone as she could manage before turning to the stranger. “I’m Ahrue, this is my mate, Solas. You must be new to the clan.”

The stranger smiled earnestly. “I’ve been here a few years now, I’m Junar. Andaran atish’an.”

“He’s Marin’s husband. From another Dalish clan,” Rohan said tightly. “His Keeper was killed by a traitorous First and her Shemlen and flat ear friends. But I’m sure that won’t happen here.”

Ahrue breathed deeply to keep herself from snapping back while Junar shifted uncomfortably and grimaced at Rohna’s words. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” she said to Junar, with more gentleness than she felt.

“As am I,” Solas said. “Was your clan forced to disperse after your Keeper’s death?”

“Not initially,” he said frowning. “But at the last clansmeet a few years ago, we decided it would be best. What happened with our Keeper and First… you can’t really come back from that.”

“I can imagine,” Solas said while Ahrue nodded sympathetically.

“I hope you have found some measure of peace with clan Lavellan, Junar,” Ahrue said,
appreciating that this man looked at Solas when he spoke to him and seemed uncomfortable at the tension Rohna brought to bear.

“*Ma serannas,*” he said with a soft smile. “I have. As have the other members of Sabrae who came with me to Lavellan.”

Ahrue’s stomach dropped at the mention of Sabrae. Merrill’s clan. From Merrill’s telling, the Keeper had bound herself to a demon in her fear that the monster would possess Merrill. Merrill, Hawke, Fenris, and Isabella had killed the abomination out of necessity. Across the distance, Ahrue’s heart went out to Merrill, knowing how much it would hurt her to hear herself painted as the traitor who murdered her Keeper and caused the dissolution of her clan. Solas sighed next to her, and she knew the same thoughts gripped him. “I’m glad to hear that,” Ahrue said in a pained tone, wishing she was in a position to come to Merrill’s defense.

“Pelev’s Kissy Kes is from Sabrae, too,” Hari said with a wink. “They’re a good lot.”

Junar’s smile broadened. “*Vir adahlen.*” Together we are stronger than the one. It was the tenant of Elven belief that Ahrue held most dear, and also the one her clan accused her of breaking, not able to understand that it was a greater unity she sought than the scattered tribes the Dalish formed. Junar seemed to suddenly realize he’d made a misstep, and his smile faded.

Rohna knew it too, but she grinned, relishing the pain Ahrue felt. “*Vir adahlen,*” she said extending the vowels in a slow savoring of the words, like a knife twisting in Ahrue’s gut. “Now go on by,” she said, tossing her head in the direction of camp. “The Keeper will want to see you.”

Ahrue nodded and said, “*Ma serannas, lethallan, lethallin,*” before stepping past them. The others began to follow but Rohna halted Solas with a firm hand on his shoulder.

Ahrue whirled on her, anger mounting. “Are you seriously going to prevent him from entering camp?” she snapped. “Do you trust me so little?”

Solas met Rohna’s glare but said nothing. No doubt he was appreciating the irony of this Dalish guard dutifully keeping Fen’harel from the clan.

“You mind yourself, flat ear,” Rohna growled. “You may have turned our sister’s heart against us, but the rest of us will not be so easily beguiled. Know that you will be watched. Every moment.”


Rohna released him with snarl. Ahrue took his hand and they hurriedly moved onward. The twins raced on ahead, no doubt to warn the rest of the clan of Ahrue’s arrival. Ahrue appreciated the moment’s peace. “I’m sorry,” she said softly to Solas in the ancient dialect of Elvish they always spoke in Enansal’nan and when they were alone. “You don’t deserve this. You should have stayed with Era.”

He shook his head. “Do not trouble yourself with concern for me, my heart. I was aware of the probability of such treatment when I insisted you take me. Their disrespect is a product of ignorance and means nothing to me except in that it injures you.”

Ahrue snorted. “You’re a liar. It makes you mad. You hide it well, but I know you well enough to recognize when your temper is rising.”

He shook his head. “It is no matter. My pride can withstand a few slurs.”

She tightened her grip on his hand and he answered in kind. “Thank you for putting up with it. You
“...being here... I don’t think I could do this without you.”

“You could,” he said firmly. “But I would not wish you to have to endure it alone.”

She put her head on his shoulder while they walked. “I love you more every day. You know that, don’t you?”

“And I you,” he said tenderly.

Soon the sight of aravels, the halla herd, and people shuffling about and clustered around the camp’s fires peaked through the trees. Ahrue and Solas were quickly spotted by a group of children who’d apparently positioned themselves to catch first glimpse of the arriving guests. All of them would see Ahrue as a stranger, having known her only through rumor or long forgotten memories of her tending to them in their first years of life. Nor did Ahrue recognize them except in their resemblances to their older family members. Upon seeing them, several of the children called out, while others ran to hide behind their parents’ legs. At the children’s reactions, adults began to turn and rise. Their body language varied from delighted to furious, and Ahrue wanted more than ever to turn back, but Solas continued to drive her forward.

As they drew closer to the familiar and unfamiliar faces, the crowd parted and Keeper Deshanna stepped forward to meet them. The Keeper was staggeringly beautiful, even in her advanced years. Her long white hair appeared luminescent and caught the barely present wind to great effect. Her body was unbent by age, and her stance projected an aura of power that Ahrue had spent her life attempting to emulate. But now, in front of this matriarch whom Ahrue had spent her first thirty years apprenticing, she felt herself shrink.

Deshanna stood very close to Ahrue, expression inscrutable as she stared into her eyes. “So,” Deshanna said in her gravelly contralto, “Our lost daughter has returned to us at last.”

Ahrue willed her voice and hands to steadiness and straightened her posture. “Yes, Keeper. As you and my grandfather asked, I have come.”

The corners of Deshanna’s mouth curved in a slight satisfied smile. She turned to Solas. “And you are the one she walks with now.”

Solas bowed his head. “Anderan atish’an, Keeper. I am Solas.”

Deshanna laughed darkly. “And what are you Solas? You are not one of the shemlen pets taught to beg for human approval. Yet you are not of the people.”

Solas cocked his head in surprise at Deshanna’s intuition. “You are correct. I have lived apart from humans and Dalish alike.”

“Then who are your people, these elves who have adopted our Ahrue?” Deshanna pressed, eyes narrowed.

Solas looked to Ahrue and back to Deshanna. “We call ourselves Enansal’vhen. And we have always lived apart from the humans and Dalish, with only rare contact with any outsiders.”

“And yet you accept my First as one of your own? Why?”

Solas’ face brightened and his mouth relaxed into a soft smile. “She is extraordinary, as I am sure you are well aware.”

Deshanna’s gaze drifted to Ahrue. “Indeed,” she said, her face sinking into a frown that gripped
Ahrue’s heart. She turned back to Solas, and her expression regained its icy shrewdness. “Anderan atish’an, Solas. You may walk among the people.”

“Ma serannas, Keeper,” Solas said, with a hint of surprise in his tone.

Deshanna nodded. “Now follow me, da’len,” she said to Ahrue, and several onlookers let out groans of objection. “Your grandfather asks after you daily,” she continued as she began to lead Ahrue and Solas toward Hawel’s aravel. “He will want to know you have arrived. The rest of the clan can wait.”

“Keeper,” Ahrue said, falling into step behind Deshanna. “I thought perhaps I’d wait until tomorrow. After we’ve had a chance to rest from our journey.” She wasn’t ready for this. It was too much too soon.

“No,” Deshanna responded without looking back. “You will see him now.”

Ahrue stopped, panic freezing her. “Please, Keeper!” she said, voice shrill with desperation. “I need time! I can’t just…”

Deshanna turned and moved in close to Ahrue, their noses a hands’ breadth apart. “Your needs are immaterial. He does not have time. Hawel has been holding on to life for you, and I will not have him die while you’re swapping stories with your cousins.”

Ahrue swallowed her shame. No matter her age, Ahrue always felt like a child when Deshanna spoke to her. “Can you not understand why this is difficult for me?” Ahrue asked, fighting back the tears that threatened to break through.

“Of course I understand,” Deshanna said, voice edged with irritation. “It is no less difficult for him or any of us. But we will endure, and so will you.” She turned away and continued her path to the aravel, Ahrue and Solas following behind her.

She felt helpless, regretted coming with every step. What she wouldn’t give to be home with Era right then, holding her close and listening as the little one spun her a story about a fish who was in love with the moon. Far away from clan Lavellan, with people who loved and respected her, who valued what she valued, who accepted her choices and felt compassion for her pain. Solas, fingers interlaced with hers, was a piece of that place, that community, but his presence here could not shield her from the judgment of those she’d once called kin. And in that moment, she couldn’t help but resent him for convincing her to come.

Deshanna opened the door of Hawel’s aravel and stepped inside. Ahrue’s breath stopped, and she closed her eyes, willing herself to be anywhere else. For a heartbeat, she even considered using her anchor to open a rift and step into the fade. She was better equipped to fight any demon or figment that might attack her there than she was to deal with her clan.

Solas grasped her shoulders, and bent his head to search her eyes. “Vhenan, breathe.” She obeyed taking a few deep breaths. “I will be outside the aravel.” She nodded. Knowing that it would be best if he stayed outside, but wishing desperately that he would keep ahold of her. But he didn’t. He released her shoulders when Deshanna beckoned, but before he did, Ahrue felt a wave of calm pass through her, a spell to slow her pulse and calm her breath. “It isn’t much,” he said. “But perhaps that will help some.”

She smiled weakly. “Thank you. I’m sure it will.”

He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “You are so much more than they know,” he
said, voice bright with adoration. “Ar lath ma, vhenan.”

She took another deep breath. “I love you too. I’ll try not to be too long.”

He shook his head and ran his fingers through her closely shorn hair. “Take whatever time you need.” Ahrue grabbed his collar and drew him in for a kiss before heading through the open door of the aravel.

The smell struck her as soon as her foot passed the threshold. The scent of medicinal herbs stung her sinuses and tickled the back of her throat, while the subtler odors of urine, excrement, and vomit hung at the edges of her senses. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the dim candlelight. She had lived here, shared the small wagon with her grandfather in the colder months when she could not sleep under the stars, their cots pressed to the opposite walls had left just enough space between them for a small table and a narrow walkway. Now, the second bed was gone, her grandfather’s cot filling the center of the room. The small table at his side was crowded with a lamp, poultices, books, and a ceramic mug. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a single chair.

Hawel slept. He was much thinner than he had been. This once large man who had towered over every other elf in the clan, who’d made a lifelong hobby of physically dominating anyone who crossed him, looked frail and small. It was right that he should end this way, Ahrue thought to herself, even as shame in the satisfaction his weakness brought sat heavily on her chest.

The Keeper stood at his bedside, crouching slightly, as Ahrue did, to accommodate the low roof. she gently shook his arm. “She is here, Hawel,” Deshanna said loudly. “Ahrue is here.”

Hawel stirred, blinking in the candlelight. “Who?” His voice too, once booming, sounded small and fragile.

“Ahrue,” Deshanna repeated, lifting his head and back and adjusting the pillows to support him in an upright position. “She came.”

Hawel perked up. “She came?” he said gruffly. “Good, good. Send her in, then.”

“Use your eyes, lathallin,” Deshanna said, straightening his blankets. “She’s not three feet from your face.”

Hawel squinted her way and snorted. “So she is.” He waved her over. “Come into the light so I can see you, da’len.”

“I will take my leave of you,” Deshanna said, and Ahrue nodded. The Keeper bent under the threshold and hopped out of the aravel, thankfully leaving the door opened behind her. Although she knew she was in no danger from this withered man, it comforted her to know that Solas would be able to hear them from his position outside the wagon. It would save her from summarizing their conversation to him in detail later.

With Deshanna gone, Ahrue took the seat beside Hawel’s bed where the candlelight could catch her face. He studied her, tilting his head from side to side, looking her up and down. She felt as though she should say something, ask how he was feeling, but the words caught in her throat.

Hawel frowned and shook his head. “Still such a beauty. Just like your father.”

Ahrue nodded. He’d told her the same thing many times while she was growing up, and she never knew what to say in response. She couldn’t remember her father’s face well enough to object or agree.
“Did the shems cut out your tongue?” he snapped. “Speak, child.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Ahrue said, barely above a whisper. “I don’t even know why you wanted me here.”

Hawel clenched and unclenched his jaw. “Is it so surprising that I wanted to see my family one last time before the end?”

“No,” Ahrue said. “But I’m surprised you still count me among them.”

He waved her comment off. “You’re being dramatic. You’re still my blood.” He cleared his sinuses with a sniff and straightened his shoulders. “Now, let me see it, this child of yours.”

Ahrue too straightened her posture. “Ghilan’era is not here. She’s too young for the trip, and we didn’t want to subject her to any animosity the clan may feel toward me and her father.”

Hawel scowled. “So the flat ear is here, is he?” he said wryly.

Ahrue nodded, the tension behind her eyes increasing every time someone called Solas a flat ear. “Solas is just outside.”

“Well bring him in,” Hawel growled. “Let me get a look at the man who despoiled my granddaughter and turned her against her people.”

“You don’t need to meet him,” Ahrue said flatly. “Especially not if you’re going to insult him.”

Hawel laughed. “But isn’t that why he came? To verify for himself that we are backward savages with outdated values? Isn’t he curious to meet the aging villain of all your self-pitying stories?”

She was certain Solas was curious to meet Hawel. “He’s not what you think,” she said, leaning back in her chair and smiling thinly. “You owe my being here to him, you know. I would have ignored your letter if he hadn’t convinced me that I should try to make peace with you.”

Hawel’s eyes narrowed. “Then allow me the opportunity to thank him.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s likely,” Ahrue said with a roll of her eyes. “If you’re hoping to get a rise out of him, you’ll be disappointed.”

He chuckled. “You wouldn’t deny an old man the chance to at least try, would you?”

She shrugged. “Fine, have it your way.” She craned her neck and called out, “Solas, you can come in if you wish.”

Solas stepped into the aravel, ducking his head. He squatted next to Ahrue and bowed his head. “Anderan atish’an, Haren Hawel.”

Hawel snorted. “So you taught him a few words of Elvish to impress us?” he said with a sneer.

“We’re not here to impress you. Solas speaks Elvish fluently, and knows dialects dating back to Arlathan,” Ahrue said, smirking. “But I’m sure he’d be happy to speak in common so you can keep up.”

“Oh, is that so?” Hawel said mockingly.

“It is,” Solas said evenly. “Elvish was my first language. I did not learn common until… much later.”
“That is preposterous,” said Hawel.

“Believe as you will,” Solas said. “Your beliefs have no bearing on the facts of my life.”

“So is that how you talk Dalish girls into your bed? Some honeyed words in Elvish and they cleave to you?”

Ahrue forced herself to laugh while Solas scowled. “I suppose you did speak to me in Elvish right before I asked you to my bed!” she said to Solas. “Remember, you said, ‘Ar lath ma,’ and I…”

“What is wrong with you?” Hawel snapped. “Crassness comes so easily to you now?”

Ahrue leaned forward. “You were crass. I was describing a moment when I realized the man I loved, loved me in return. A moment when I chose him over tradition. That is what you wanted to know about isn’t it?”

“I want to hear it from him!” Hawel said. “I wanted to know how he manipulated my granddaughter into betraying her people!” Ahrue knew that tone. It was the one he used before he struck. But in this bed, shrunken and dying, Hawel was not a danger to her or Solas.

“He didn’t manipulate me into anything. In fact, he showed great respect for my heritage.”

“By bedding you outside of the bonding and filling you with his bastard child?”

Ahrue was tempted to tell him the whole story, how Mythal had manipulated them to conceive Era, how the ancient elves whose traditions the Dalish claimed to honor had no reservations against children born outside of the bonding. Even the bonding tradition had been greatly distorted over time, with the Dalish version a far cry from the original practices surrounding kinship bonds. But she knew he wouldn’t believe her, and even if he did, she did not owe him an explanation. So she simply said, “My choices are my own, grandfather. Solas respected my choices, but did not make them for me.”

“Of course he ‘respected’ your choices, foolish girl!” her grandfather said, the disgust of his sneer deepening. “It meant he got to use you according to his whims.”

“And you think I am still using her, all these years later?” Solas asked, his head cocked and eyes narrowed. “Whatever you may think of my original intentions, surely time has shown that she is more than that to me.” Ahrue could sense the thoughts behind Solas words; he felt the justice in Hawel’s accusation that he had used Ahrue. Certainly it was true at one time, as he’d manipulated her in his quest for the orb. But he had never used her in the way Hawel meant. She would remind Solas of that later.

Hawel nodded slowly, but his disdainful look didn’t fade. “You stayed for the child, I’ll give you that much. Most flat ears would have walked out on her the moment her belly started to bulge.”

Solas’ face fell. Again, Ahrue knew he was injured by the closeness of Hawel’s words, the old guilt for having left her rising to the surface. Ahrue placed her hand on the back of his neck to gently remind him that he’d been forgiven, that he had long since made things right. “I stay for both of them,” Solas said softly. “They have my heart until death takes me.”

“You say that,” Hawel said, shaking his head. “but I see no promise rings on your fingers. And in letters home, Ahrue calls you her mate, not her husband.”

Ahrue sighed. “We have made our promises to each other, Grandfather. We don’t need bits of metal and a Keeper’s blessing to solidify our devotion.”
Hawel’s lip curled. “More evidence of how far your flat ear has led you astray.”

“Solas offered to observe the tradition,” Ahrue snapped. “But I didn’t think it necessary. After all, I knew you and Deshanna would never approve of our union, so what would be the point of going through the motions of the ritual?”

“You did not even ask for our blessing!” Hawel roared.

Rage sparked in Ahrue. “Need I remind you how you responded when I sent word to you of Era’s birth?” she said, voice laced with venom. “I reached out a hand of kinship, and you slapped it away. Don’t you dare pretend that I didn’t give you the chance to accept us.”

“And if I had accepted you and your mate, what would you have done?” He asked, skin flushed with anger or shame.

Ahrue looked away. She’d never believed they would, so she hadn’t considered how their acceptance might have changed her path. “I don’t know,” she said in a low voice.

Hawel folded his hands over his stomach. “Well, now we have a chance to find out,” he said.

Ahrue’s stomach dropped. “What?” she said, dubiously.

“Deshanna and I have agreed that it’s time for you to come home,” he said gruffly. “You will need to endure Vir’athim.”


“I am not. Pride has led you astray,” he said looking meaningfully at Solas. “But even the gods themselves were deceived by Fen’harel; How could I expect more from you than from them?” He frowned. “Deshanna and I accept our share of the blame in your fall. We’d thought we’d prepared you for the temptations of the shemlen world. We were wrong, and all of us payed the price.”

Ahrue pressed the palm of her hand to her right eye to still the headache that throbbed behind it. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” she said, voice betraying her exhaustion.

Ahrue flinched as Hawel placed a hand on her knee. “You belong with your people, da’len,” he said with unnerving intensity. “You are the First, a descendent of the honored nobility of the Dales. You are a Lavellan.”

Ahrue almost laughed at how little he understood the true inheritance of her bloodline. “This is why you asked me here?” she asked, still unbelieving. “You want me to rejoin the clan?”

“It will not be easy,” he said gravely. “You have much to make amends for, and you must prove that you are prepared to recommit yourself to your kin and the old ways. But, yes, we wish for you to rejoin us, and in time, when our trust is regained, to take your place as Keeper.”

Now Ahrue really did laugh. It was ludicrous. “You’re actually serious? After everything that has happened?” She asked the second question more to herself than to Hawel. He didn’t understand half of it. She’d helped Fen’harel kill Mythal; what act of penance would that require? “And what of my family?” she pressed. “Do you expect me to leave my daughter and mate behind?”

“Your daughter is young and is not burdened by your dishonor; the clan would welcome her readily. As for your mate,” he turned to Solas who looked considerably less surprised than Ahrue, “That is entirely up to him.”
“You would accept a flat ear?” he asked curiously.

“It is not our clan’s custom to accept those not of the people. But you do not strike me as a typical flat ear. If you too agree to endure the trials of Vir’athim, and demonstrate an earnest devotion to our ways, we will permit you to remain at Ahrue’s side.”

“Most kind of you,” Solas said. His tone was warm enough, but Ahrue could detect the tensing of his neck and hands. Fen’harel joining a Dalish clan. It was beyond absurd and more than a little insulting for everyone involved.

“What exactly would be required of us?” Ahrue asked, more out of curiosity than honestly considering the prospect of rejoining her clan.

Hawel smiled, thinking he’d won some ground. “Deshanna will tell you more, da’len.” He grunted, as he tried to move into a more reclined position. “Now go away. I wish to rest. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”
When Ahrue and Solas exited the aravel, the odor of medicinal distillations and bodily matter was mercifully supplanted by the scent of fire roasted vegetables and savory herbs. The clan was gathering for the evening meal as much as to witness the return of their wayward lethallan. Many eyes were on her, while others pointedly avoided looking her way. Keeper Deshanna was nowhere to be seen; Ahrue would need to seek her out later to get more information about the Vir’athim Hawel had mentioned. What forms of debasement did the clan want from her in order to justify their forgiveness?

Ahrue did not have much opportunity to consider the answer to her question before her train of thought was derailed by Pelev running up to her and grabbing her hands. “How was it?” she asked, smiling nervously.

Ahrue shrugged. “Not any worse than I’d feared, I guess. I’m not really sure what to make of it.”

Pelev’s eyes and smile broadened. “Did he ask you to come back?”

“Sort of,” Ahrue said with a grimace.

Pelev squealed and grabbed Ahrue in a bouncing hug. “I knew he would! Now I bet you’re really wishing you’d brought the baby so you wouldn’t have to go all the way back to get her!”

Ahrue’s heart warmed at Pelev’s eagerness to accept her back into the clan. “It’s not that simple, Pel,” she said once the younger woman had released her from the embrace.

Pelev’s face fell. “What do you mean?”

“I need to process everything. Discuss the matter with the Keeper and Solas. Not to mention that I have people depending on me in my new clan.” She didn’t add that she saw no place for herself or Solas in clan Lavellan. That conversation could wait until she’d had time to think things through. “It’s all very… unexpected.”

Pelev’s face brightened again. “I’ll bet! You take your time, lethallan! Have a good chat with your honey and the Keeper.” She winked knowingly. “You’ll stay in the end; I know it.”

Guilt thickened in Ahrue’s throat. She’d undoubtedly be breaking Pelev’s heart before she left for Enansal’nan. Would she forgive her for abandoning Lavellan a second time?

Pelev tugged on her arm, and, after a second’s hesitation took Solas’ hand as well. “Now come on you two! Everyone wants to see you!”

Ahrue was in something of a haze during the evening meal. The dread and anxiety had given way to exhaustion, both physical and emotional. People strange and familiar buzzed around her, pressing her with questions and updates on all the happenings of the clan. She was introduced to children that had been born and people who had joined the clan since her departure. Parents proudly showed off their offspring of various ages who’d grown beyond Ahrue’s recognition in the past seven years.

Most of the clan was glad to see her, however, like Hari and Pelev had demonstrated, there was evident discomfort with Solas’ presence. Few spoke to him directly, and those who did mostly confined themselves to conversations about their trip and the meal. It was better than overt hostility. Only Achel, the halla keeper, seemed at ease around him, a fact which pleased Ahrue.
Achel had always been a favorite of Ahrue. He was a foundling, rescued from slavers and brought into the clan when Ahrue was eight years old and he was ten. His parents had been killed in an effort to escape the slavers transporting them north, leaving Achel an orphan. He had arrived shortly after Ahrue’s own parents had died in a bandit attack, and the two children had found in one another a shared grief. Many in the clan had expected the two to wed, but under the stars when Achel and Ahrue would share secrets in hushed voices, Achel had whispered into her ear that he liked boys, specifically the crafter’s apprentice, Assan. The traditional bonding would not accommodate his desires, nor did Assan give any indication of sharing them, so Achel told no one but Ahrue of his attraction, and she guarded his confession like the precious gift it was.

“So, tell me, Solas,” Achel said after a warm reunion and introductions, “how did you meet my dear lethallan?”

Solas smiled softly at either Achel’s warmth or the memory of their first meeting. “Ahrue was a prisoner of the shemlen in the town of Haven, dying from an ancient magic: the mark that scars her hand still. They thought her guilty of causing the explosion that killed their Divine.”

Achel frowned at Ahrue. “I heard about that.”

“Solas saved my life,” Ahrue said. “He convinced the humans not to execute me while I was unconscious and stabilized the mark enough to keep me alive.”

“She did not meet me until days later when she awoke and used her mark to close a rift, proving herself to be exactly the savior we so desperately needed,” Solas continued.

Achel smirked. “And you were so enraptured by her beauty and brilliance that you decided to remain with her Inquisition.”

Solas’ eyes danced in the firelight. “It was an incentivizing factor.”

Ahrue laughed. “He’s joking. Solas is an expert on the fade and ancient magics,” she said. “He remained with the Inquisition because he had special insight into what we were facing. If he hadn’t stayed with the Inquisition, we would not have been successful in closing the breach and stopping Corypheus.”

“Vir adahlen,” Achel said raising his cup of tea. “Together we are stronger than the one.”

“Indeed,” Solas said brightly. “Many played a role in the Inquisition’s victory, but Ahrue was the linchpin. She united nations to serve our cause. No one else could have achieved what she did.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Achel said with a wink.

Ahrue squirmed a little under Solas’ description of her role. “It sounds silly, doesn’t it? Me leading nations.”

“Not at all,” Achel said. “I know I would follow you into the Beyond if you asked me to. You’ve always had this impossible—I don’t know what to call it—_something_ about you. Like this special blend of qualities that make everyone want to turn to you when things get rough. It’s why you would have made a good Keeper.” He turned to Solas while Ahrue blushed. “I hope you and your people know how lucky you all are to have her, friend.”

“Believe me,” Solas said, beaming at Ahrue, “we are well aware. She means a great deal to us all.”

Achel nodded thoughtfully. “Tell me about them. Your—what should I call them—your _clan_, your _people_?”
"We call ourselves clan Enansal’vhen," Solas began cautiously, trying out the new title Abelas had chosen.

Achel furrowed his brow. "All elves, then?"

"Yes. We are not so different from the Dalish in many respects. We live apart from humans and try to preserve and honor the past. We do, however, go about preserving and honoring the past somewhat differently from what you are accustomed."

"How so?" Achel asked, leaning back. "I see you don’t wear the vallaslin."

"We… interpret the vallaslin differently than the Dalish do, and so are not compelled to wear it. However, many of our clan choose to wear them still." Many others had asked Solas to remove them, now that they were free from Mythal’s thralldom.

"How do you interpret the vallaslin," Achel pressed. Solas tensed, clearly uncertain how much was wise to tell Achel who noticed Solas’ discomfort immediately. He laughed and clapped Solas on the shoulder. "Never mind, lethallin. This isn’t meant to be a trial."

Solas released a relieved breath. "My apologies. I am… aware that some of your clan are not eager to see their First with one not of the People. I simply do not wish to cause additional conflict by emphasizing our points of difference."

Achel nodded. "Fair enough. Though I hope you’ll believe me when I say I wholeheartedly trust that Ahrue would only join you and your people if they were deserving. If we could not keep her, the failing is surely ours, not yours."

His words simultaneously validated Ahrue’s choices and feelings and broke her heart. She took his hand in hers. "Never your failing, lethallin. Never."

"Oh course not," he said with a half-smile. "But, Creators, I’ve missed you, Rue."

Ahrue’s chest tightened seeing the poorly masked hurt in Achel’s eyes. He understood why she had stayed away, didn’t resent or judge her choices, but still he was wounded. She’d been the one person he had trusted with his entire self, and she’d abandoned him. Ahrue blinked back tears at the recognition of how lonely he must have been all these years. When she was young, as much as she’d felt alienated at times with her kin, at least she and Achel had had each other. Now, she’d found in Solas and the Sentinels a group of people who understood and accepted her wholeheartedly, but Achel was even more alone than he’d been when they were growing up. "I’m sorry," she said softly.

Achel scooted in close and put an arm around her, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "Hey, don’t do that. Don’t feel guilty. Not on my account. There’re enough people here trying to make you feel ashamed of yourself without adding me to the pile. I’m just glad you found people who accept and appreciate you."

Ahrue caught the hints; Achel wanted her to ask him to come back with them to Enansal’nan. But there was more going on here than he knew. The Sentinels weren’t just a group of unconventional elves, and Ahrue’s presence wasn’t simply an awkward visit to a dying relative. She couldn’t start asking people to leave Lavellan or the Enansal’vhen would quickly be branded enemies of the Dalish, sent to seduce the naive into leaving the clans. They already believed this to be the case regarding Solas with Ahrue as his mark. She needed to repair that perspective, not perpetuate it. Otherwise, the chance of uniting the Dalish and the Elvhen would be slim indeed. So she smiled sadly at Achel, hoping he could sense the apology and regret in her expression, and said "Thank
He nodded and released her. “You know, there’s a rumor going around that you’re going to be invited to return.”

“It is more than a rumor,” Solas said, a bemused expression curling the corners of his lips. “Apparently the keeper had some tasks or rituals in mind for us to prove that we are reasonably contrite.”

Achel’s eyes widened. “Then you’ve been asked to join as well? They must be more desperate to have Ahrue return than I thought.”

“Indeed,” Solas said wryly.

Achel winced. “I’m sorry. That must have sounded rude. I only mean that accepting adults into the clan who aren’t of the People… I don’t think there’s precedent for it. I was only ten when they took me in, and there was still grumbling about me being too old.” Achel chuckled. “More than two decades later and some still treat me like an outsider.”

“It took me by surprise,” Ahrue said, swallowing back more guilt at Achel’s misery. “I was half expecting that they’d asked me back to formalize my exile.”

Ahrue shook her head. “Deshanna is old, and everyone can tell that her new First isn’t up to the task to take over. On top of that, bandit attacks on the Dalish have climbed steadily in the past few years, and not just for Lavellan. Entire clans have been wiped out. And, like I said, you’re the kind of person people turn to when things get rough.”

Ahrue furrowed her brow. “I wonder what’s caused the increased aggression against the Dalish?” she thought out loud.

Achel shrugged. “I don’t know. With how much unrest the humans have experienced in the past fifteen years or so—the blight, regicide, civil war, the mage rebellions, and all the mess they pulled you into—it’s not surprising that they’d be jumpy.”

Solas nodded. “And eager to prove they are stable by eliminating any perceived minor threat.”

“Never mind that most of their unrest has come from other humans,” Ahrue said, seething. “I swear, when we were with the Inquisition, most of our time and resources were spent cleaning up shemlen messes. But somehow we’re the threat?”

“Which brings to mind another possible cause of the increased aggression,” Solas said. “Perhaps the recent disbandment of the Inquisition has left a void. Without an Inquisitor identifying shared enemies against which Thedas need mobilize…”

“The shems find their own convenient targets to exercise their need to enact stability and a sense of self,” Ahrue said, completing his thought. “And in the absence of world-ending conflict, that means elves get to be their stand-in victims. Displace all their fears and anxieties onto us. Like always.”

Achel smiled weakly. “And that’s why the clan wants you, Rue. You spent a year leading and fighting humans. You know how they think. You know how to handle them.”

Ahrue rolled her eyes. “They’re hardly a monolithic group, Achel.”

He shrugged. “Maybe not. But even the fact that you get that makes you better suited than the rest
of us to manage them.”

She narrowed her eyes at Achel. “Where are you coming from here? One moment you’re telling me that I shouldn’t let the clan guilt me into staying, and the next you tell me that I’m the Dalish’ best chance for survival.”

He sighed. “I don’t know. I guess I mean both: don’t stay, and help us if you can. You were the Inquisitor of Thedas, after all. Leading a clan of a few dozen seems like small potatoes compared to what you’re capable of.”

“Like Solas said, the Inquisition is disbanded,” she said, wishing she could live up to Achel’s expectations of her. “I can’t just order troops to clear out bandits anymore.”

“But you have connections!” he said, leaning forward.

“Unfortunately, most of Ahrue’s connections believe her to have died at the hands of the Venatori nearly six years ago,” Solas said. “Revealing the fact that she survived would likely cause more conflict, not reduce it.”

“So you’re completely powerless?” he asked incredulously.

Ahrue chewed on her lip thoughtfully. Not powerless, no. “There may be something. But I need to give it some thought. And there is no easy solution.”

Achel’s frustrated expression broke into a winning grin. “I have total faith in you, lethallan.” He rose to his feet. “Now I need to return to my herd before it gets too dark to see. But we’ll talk soon?”

“Count on it,” Ahrue said with a tired smile.

“Good to meet you, Solas,” he said with a wave before turning back to Ahrue and making a fist in front of his face. “And stay strong, Rue. Don’t let Hawel, Deshanna, or the others bully you.”

“I’ll try,” she said, smirking. With that, Achel turned on his heel and whistled a tune as he made his way to the halla pen.

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When the meal was over and Ahrue and Solas had finished assisting in the clean-up, Besal, the new First to the Keeper, approached Ahrue, a twisted expression on his young face. “Keeper Deshanna wants to see you now, harellan,” he said venomously. Ahrue understood that he had the most to lose from her presence. If Hawel had his way and Ahrue rejoined the clan, Besal could be deposed as First and likely never become Keeper. He felt threatened, and certainly had personal investment in making sure the visitors feel unwelcome and kept their visit short. “The flat ear too,” he said, scowling at Solas.

“Alright,” Ahrue said blandly, refusing to let a jealous child rile her. “Where can we find her?”

“This way,” he said, turning in what Ahrue could assume was the direction of the Keeper’s aravel.

Ahrue and Solas followed behind. Her gut churned anxiously, but her conversation with Achel had put her at comparative ease. Whatever the Keeper might say, she wanted Ahrue to return. Were she to agree to rejoin, whatever was asked of her in undergoing the Vir’athim would smooth things over with the clan, demonstrating an earnest devotion to them. But ultimately, no matter their self-righteous anger over her having a child with a flat ear and whatever else they might resent her for,
the clan largely believed that they needed her, and they would be willing to forgive much to feel secure in her leadership. It occurred to her, however, that refusing to rejoin them would likely be an offense that could not be overlooked; the Keeper might yet make her exile official, and that would make an accord between Lavellan and Enansal’vhen very unlikely.

Outside her aravel, the Keeper sat in front of a small, glowing fire pit on a make-shift stool cut from a tree trunk. Two other such seats were positioned across from her. As they approached, Deshanna gestured at the open seats. “Sit,” she ordered them before turning to Besal to say “Leave us.”

Besar opened his mouth as though to object, but a glower from the Keeper made him think better of it. He turned and stomped away in a huff, muttering under his breath. Ahrue and Solas took their seats and waited silently for the Keeper to begin.

After stoking the fire and spending several minutes sipping her tea while staring at her guests, Deshanna at last spoke. “I wish for there to be honesty between us, da’len,” she said in a heavy voice.

“Honesty, Keeper?” Ahrue asked, her stomach tightening, fearing what she might be prompted to confess. “I have not lied to you.” Omitted details, but never lied.

“Is that so?” Deshanna said blandly. “I wish I could say as much.” She fixed Ahrue with her intense copper eyes. “I have deceived you, Ahrue. And the shame of it weighs on me still. I did not send you to the South to spy on the humans’ conclave. I did it at the behest of another.”

Ahrue looked to Solas whose head was tilted curiously. Mythal had implied that she’d manipulated Deshanna into sending Ahrue to the Conclave. The details of Mythal’s maneuverings were of great interest to both Ahrue and Solas, but it was a bit of information that they’d thought too delicate to pry into. After all, their questions would likely raise more questions on the part of Keeper, and may reveal more than they were prepared to share. They had not expected Deshanna to offer the information without prompting. “What do you mean? At whose behest?” Ahrue asked.

The Keeper took a deep breath before continuing. “Seven years ago, I had a vision. Asha’bellanar came to me and said that The People would face many great trials in the years to come.”

Even expecting the Keeper’s confession, Ahrue’s heart dropped at the mention of the woman she’d known as Mythal. Solas too leaned forward slightly at the alias of his old friend. But they kept their silence.

“She told me that the Dread Wolf had stirred from his slumber, and with his every step, the world would shudder. With his first step, the veil would tear and demons would cross over into our world; with his second step, a plague would bleed from the stone and turn brothers’ minds against one another; with his third step, the kingdoms of man would fall to chaos; and with his fourth step the heavens would shatter. Each step would mean great death and destruction, and by the fourth step, the world would be destroyed.”

Ahrue resisted the urge to look at Solas and gauge his response. It sounded as though Mythal had prophesized what would come to pass during the years of the Inquisition, and she’d placed the blame for those events squarely on Solas. “Why did she tell you this?” Ahrue asked steadily.

Deshanna closed her eyes. “Because she knew how the destruction could be prevented. Only you could soften the blow of Fen’harel’s steps and stop our world from dying. You alone could turn his gaze from his goal and save us all. But you could not act from here. She told me I must send you to the great gathering of Templars and Mages in the South, that you must be present when the veil
tore or all would be lost.”

Ahrue shuddered. It was true enough. “That’s why you sent me to the Conclave? Because Asha’bellanar told you to?”

Deshanna nodded gravely.

“Did she say why she thought I would be the one to stop Fen’harel?” Ahrue asked, wondering how much Mythal had told, and how much she had twisted or withheld for her own purposes.

“She said the Wolf would sense your power, a very old power, and would seek to dominate you. And for a time, he would succeed. You would be lost to the people, consumed by his lies, blind to what he was.”

“Is that what this is?” Ahrue asked, voice sharpened with anger. “You’ve asked me here to accuse me of being fooled by Fen’harel?” It hit far too close to reality for Ahrue to accept the accusations in stride, and fear rose in her throat at the possibility that Asha’bellanar might have told Deshanna who Solas was.

“Silence, child,” Deshanna said calmly. “You will let me finish.”

Ahrue risked a glance in Solas direction; He was the picture of stoicism, save for the slight flaring of his nostrils and narrowing of his eyes.

“She told me you would be taken in thralldom to Fen’harel, be forced to do his vile bidding. But before his fourth step fell, Mythal would break his hold on you, and you would destroy the Wolf.” Deshanna’s expression softened, and something like pride lit her eyes. “She warned me that if I told you any of this, you would falter and fall to Fen’harel, dooming us all. But if I sent you away, unaware of what fate would greet you, you would return to us one day, forged by the fires of Fen’harel’s wrath, cooled by the blessing of Mythal, ready to lead the People into a new age of strength and prosperity.”

“And you believed her?” Solas asked calmly.

“I felt the truth of her words,” Deshanna said, nodding slowly while maintaining her penetrating eye contact with Ahrue. “You are unique, child. I did not need the humans or Asha’bellanar to tell me this. The power in you was unlike any I have ever felt, even then. I had no doubt the Dread Wolf would be drawn to you.” She chuckled. “How often had Hawel warned that the Wolf stalked you? He meant it as a criticism of you, that you were too easily seduced by dangerous ideas. But in truth, he feared your power made you a target for dangerous forces. It is why he was always so hard on you.”

“He beat her because he thought abuse would protect her from danger?” Solas snapped, his calm faltering. “What a convenient excuse! Such acts are more likely to compel a victim to turn to demons or spirits out of desperation. You are all very fortunate that Ahrue’s will did not falter under those conditions.”

Ahrue held up a hand to halt him. “Solas, it’s not important right now. I’m more interested to know why Deshanna acted on Asha’bellanar’s words with little more than a feeling that my power would make me a target.”

Deshanna’s chin quivered slightly. “It was not the first time Asha’bellanar showed an interest in you.”

Of course. The witch had spent generations planning for Era’s birth; she would not allow her
investment to go unchecked. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“She came to me three times before that day: when we were arranging a match for your father, during your parents’ bonding ceremony, and just after you were born. The first time, it was in a dream. Your father had fallen in love with a woman from another clan. Your mother. But her clan could offer little as a dowry, and she had been sickly her entire life. It seemed a poor match. I was prepared to deny him his request to wed her… until Asha’bellanar came to me in a dream. She told me that his intended was of a powerful blood line that traced back to the nobility of Arlathan, and if I agreed to the match and held the bonding ceremony at the next full moon, their first union would yield a child of incredible power. And that child would grow to be a savior of the people.”

The knot in Ahrue’s stomach doubled. “And you did as she told you.”

“I did. The Keepers in our clan have always prospered from heeding Asha’bellanar’s council. On the day of your parents’ bonding, she appeared again. This time in the flesh. She gave your mother a charm enchanted with the blessing of Mythal. She told your mother that she would conceive a daughter that night, but it would be the only child she would ever birth.” Deshanna closed her eyes, perhaps remembering what must surely have been an intense moment. “True to her word, your mother’s womb soon swelled with your impending arrival. But the labor quickened too soon, and it seemed certain that the babe would be lost. Until, again, Asha’bellanar arrived. She tended to you and your mother for days. And by her skill and the grace of Mythal, you survived. Before she left, she told me that you would walk a path of great sorrow, but every moment of suffering would shape you into a vessel for divinity.”

“A vessel?” Solas said in a raised voice while Ahrue laughed bitterly. A vessel indeed. “And you kept this from Ahrue?”

Deshanna frowned. “I am sorry I had to deceive you, da’len. But you have passed through your trials, and emerged the stronger for it. I am here to help guide you back to the People and recover from the injuries done to you by the Wolf.”

Ahrue stared into the fire, trying to collect her racing thoughts and turbulent emotions. She could only imagine how Solas must feel, hearing the machinations of his oldest friend and such wrongs placed at his feet. “You were deceived, Deshanna,” Ahrue managed the words through gritted teeth. “It was not Fen’harel who held me in his thrall. It was Asha’bellanar.”

Deshanna’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?” she asked hesitantly.

“She arranged my birth and manipulated you into sending me to the Conclave. Fen’harel didn’t threaten the world. It was Corypheus who opened the rift, spread the red lyrium she foretold as a plague, destabilized the shemlen government, and threatened to shatter heaven. And believe me, Corypheus was no Fen’harel, nor did he ever enthrall me. But Asha’bellanar did.”

Deshanna said nothing, but she seemed to shrink in her skin, her face and body growing increasingly slack as she listened.

“She sought our child,” Solas said, in a tone kinder than Deshanna deserved. “That was why she wanted to ensure Ahrue’s birth, not to provide the Dalish with a savior. Ghilan’era has a unique bloodline that Asha’bellanar sought to control for herself. She manipulated us into conceiving Era, just as she apparently manipulated Ahrue’s parents, and planned to possess the child before her own elderly form expired. From what she told us, it is a plan she had spent centuries, perhaps longer, working toward.”

“She apparently has manipulated the bloodline of our family since before the fall of the Dales,”
Ahrue added, taking some pleasure in the look of disgust that crossed Deshanna’s face. Ahrue may have been used, but she was far from the only one.

“While we cannot be sure what purpose so motivated her to attempt to possess our daughter,” Solas continued, “she proved that there were no lengths to which she would not go to have her. Asha’bellanar bound Ahrue with a geas and myself with a spell that limited what actions either of us could take against her. It was only through Ahrue’s ingenuity and my own… resourcefulness that we were able to slay the witch, break the geas, and save our child.”

“You played into her hands, Keeper,” said Ahrue in a matter of fact tone. “She told you only enough of the truth to gain your compliance. If she’d had her way, Solas would be dead, she would be have possessed our daughter, and I would have been enslaved to her for the rest of my life.”

Deshanna shook her head, unbelieving. “But you did save the world. Her prophesy came true: the sky opening, the red lyrium, the civil wars…”

“Those were Corypheus’ plans, not Fen’harel’s,” Solas said firmly. “But, yes, Ahrue was needed to stop him. That much is true. And I will not curse the woman whose choices brought Ahrue into my life. However, you were manipulated at the behest of a witch who would undoubtedly have used an enthralled Ahrue and your misguided faith in the prophesy to control your clan for her own vile ends. You were mercifully spared that fate.”

“She could have forced me to kill you all, or use me as her puppet, doing her bidding at the head of the clan!” Ahrue said, standing. “Your deception could have cost the People everything.”

“And yet, it saved the world,” Deshanna said, jaw set. “And here you are, wounded but more powerful than I would ever have expected. I can sense it. Her prophesy may have held more truth than you yet know.” Deshanna rose slowly to her feet, looking more tired than Ahrue had ever seen her, turned from her guests, and walked up the steps to her aravel. The door closed softly behind her, and Ahrue and Solas were left alone in the orange light of the campfire.
Vir'lathan: Dream

Solas and Ahrue spread out their bedrolls a short distance from the main camp, just far enough away from the others that they could speak quietly without fear of being overheard. Ahrue looked spent, her shoulders slumped and face tensed. She pressed her palms to her eyes as she always did when headaches nagged her. Solas’ heart was heavy for her as he watched her lay back on her bedding and drape her arms over her face. He took a seat on his own bedroll beside her. “That was bracing,” he said with lightness that he hoped would comfort her.

She laughed, the sound bringing an easy smile to Solas’ lips. “To put it mildly. I was trying to count how many scowls I got today. Not as relaxing as counting sheep, but it might get the job done.”

He stroked her hair. “Try not to dwell on it too much, my heart. Their judgment comes from a lack of understanding and is no reflection on you.”

She rolled to her side to face him, propping herself up on her elbow. “They’re being far kinder to me than they are to you. I swear if I have to hear them call you a ‘flat ear’ one more time.”

Solas shook his head. “Do not trouble yourself. Their hostility comes as no surprise.” If anything, he had expected worse.

“That had stung. Just as Elgar’nan had done to Fenaril’s reputation millennia ago, so Mythal did now. He’d thought her better than that. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that Mythal would manipulate the Dalish fear of Fen’harel to her own ends,” he said wryly. “It seems she was plotting against me for far longer than I’d ever suspected. How much of the Dalish hatred for me is her doing, I wonder?”

Ahrue took his hand. “He’s not you, Solas. Fen’harel was always just a story, first a useful bit of propaganda, and then a myth.”

Solas frowned. “It was no myth that betrayed the Elgar’nan and the others. The stories contain too much truth for me to entirely dismiss them or the pangs of regret. And I... played a significant role in Corypheus’ actions; Mythal’s prophesy was not entirely a fabrication.”

Ahrue’s brow furrowed. “Maybe not. But you are no villain. I wish I could make them understand that.”

Solas’ eyes lit with gratitude for her sympathy. “It is not a battle you would win,” he said softly. “Let the Dalish make of Fen’harel what they will. As long as I am no monster to you, I can cope. Besides, however she may have dissembled, Mythal’s prophesy may be of use to us.”

Ahrue wrinkled her nose. “Why? Everything she predicted has come to pass or already been prevented. Or was just a flat out lie.”

“Not everything. She told your Keeper that you would return to the clan as a savior who would lead the People into an age of strength and prosperity. Your Keeper believes the prophesy to be true, regardless of our efforts to correct the record, that much is clear.”

Ahrue grunted and flopped onto her back. “Really, Solas? You want me to manipulate them into thinking I’m some savior?”
Solas tenderly tilted her chin toward him so she could see the adoring smile that graced his features. “Not manipulate, no. I want you to accept that a savior is exactly what you are.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “Be serious, Fen. I’m no more the savior of the Dalish than you are the Dread Wolf.”

“Do you believe that the Dalish and the Elvhen should be joined? That it is necessary for the survival of each?” he asked.

“You know I do,”

“And do you believe that you are uniquely positioned to arrange an accord between our peoples? That the Vir’abelasan has given you insight that will help you achieve this task?”

“Fine! Yes, I think it helps,” she said grudgingly. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll succeed. Maybe if I’d handled this all differently from the start, not told them about you or Era. But it’s done. They know that I’ve rejected their ways, and they’re not just going to let it go. Now they’re putting me in a position where to regain their trust, I have to rejoin them. Anything less will be grounds for exile. You can bet Hawel will see to that. The whole thing is maddening!”

“The Vir’a’thim,” Solas said contemplatively. He knew the words but not the traditions behind it. “What is it precisely?”

Ahrue rubbed her eyes. “It’s sort of part trial and part punishment, but it’s also about healing. It’s meant to be reparative for both the clan and the person who did wrong. Sometimes it can involve acknowledging the clan’s or other individual’s role in what happened, to accept shared blame. Deshanna’s confession was likely meant to be a part of that. But the tasks, requirements, and rituals of Vir’a’thim vary depending on the specifics of each case.”

Rare admiration for the Dalish bloomed in Solas. It was a far more just concept for punishment than the prisons and gallows favored by humans offered. “Do you have any notion what they might ask of us to complete the Vir’a’thim?”

She shrugged. “It’s hard to say. Some show of commitment to the clan, almost certainly. And probably a fair amount of self-debasement. But I don’t know, with Deshanna’s confession, they might put less blame on me than I’d expected. As for you? I haven’t a clue. There isn’t really precedent in my own clan for requiring someone who isn’t Dalish to go through the Vir’a’thim.”

“I had not expected them to extend such an offer. As your friend Achel said, they must be particularly desperate to have you return.”

“Hmm,” she said, biting her lip. “Yeah, his talk of the increase of attacks has me worried. I wonder if I can get in contact with Leliana, maybe she knows more. It would be easier to help once we’re home. I can send birds, and, if necessary, Abelas can have the Sentinels respond with some deadly hits, let the bandits know that the Dalish aren’t the easy marks they think them to be.”

Solas nodded. “A suitable plan. Additionally, it would have the side benefit of giving our people the chance to prove their allegiance to the accord.”

“As always, I am confident in you,” he said reclining beside her, scooting in close so their bodies were flush. “Regardless of any setbacks, I believe today was encouraging. There is less resentment among your people than you had feared.”
Ahrue sighed. “You’re right. I’m just tired and grouchy. I feel like a spent lyrium crystal; all of my energy sapped away.”

He kissed the back of her neck. “I understand completely, vhenan.”

Ahrue drew her arms around herself. “And I miss Era.”

Solas’ kisses tracked down Ahrue’s shoulder. “As do I,” he said, wrenched by the mention of their daughter’s name. He’d never been apart from her for so long, and the distance between them ached more every day. He could seek her out in the fade, but Ahrue had repeatedly pressed him to not involve himself in Era’s dreams unless it was necessary for her safety. Ahrue saw dreams as private, and argued that it should be up to Era whether or not they knew what occupied her mind while she slept. So he made only enough of a connection with their daughter through the fade to sense her state of mind and verify that she was not in any danger from demons who might—however unlikely—find her budding magic appealing. Sensing her mind from such a distance was comforting, but the lack of direct contact did not sate Solas’ wish to be with his child, especially considering how often the familiar vibrations of nightmares troubled her sleeping mind. At home, he could wait until morning to comfort her from the terror of unsettling dreams, but with a vast sea between them, he could only hope that Ilaran supplied sufficient comfort to the troubled girl.

“I keep wondering how she would respond to all this,” Ahrue said.

“Likely with relentless questioning,” Solas said. He could almost hear her press them: What is a ‘flat ear?’ Why don’t they speak Elvish? Why do they have so many wagons? Why is he so wrinkly? Why does she have those pictures on her face? What is that food? Do I have to eat it?

Ahrue laughed, probably imaging the same stream of ‘whys.’ “We’d be spending tonight explaining slurs and ageing to her, no doubt. It would have been nice for her to meet Achel and some of the others though.” She was quiet for a few beats. “I’m glad she won’t meet Hawel, though.”

Solas held her closer hoping his embrace acted as some small comfort in the face of the trauma the thought of Hawel always brought to the surface for her. He too was grateful that Hawel would be dead by the time Era met her mother’s clan. Just the mention of the man made Solas’ blood seethe. He reminded Solas of Elgar’nan in his youth, before Vengeance, power, and the fade had twisted him into the monster Solas had locked away: brutal, irascible, controlling, and narrow-minded. But unlike Elgar’nan, it seemed as though no one, including Deshanna, kept Hawel in check. His temper and violent outbursts were tolerated as though it was just a quirk of the old man’s personality, and Ahrue had suffered—still suffered—for it. How anyone could justify harming any child, let alone their own kin, confounded Solas completely. Solas had thought surely Hawel’s estrangement from Ahrue would have made the man rethink his harshness and look back on her youth with regret. But still Hawel showed no sense of shame in his actions—at least not outwardly—refusing to give Ahrue the peace that she so desperately needed. Perhaps Hawel needed a lesson in regret, something about which Solas knew a great deal.

“Thank you for being here, Solas,” Ahrue said in a raspy voice. “It might not make my clan comfortable having you among them, but you’ve been amazing.” She ran her fingers along his arm, making his skin prickle pleasantly. “The earth beneath me in my worst moments.”

“As you are to me,” he said softly, brushing a stray tear from her cheek, his gut tensed with contempt against those who had made this reunion difficult for her. “Sleep well, my heart; Tomorrow will likely be no easier.”

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Solas waited until Ahrue’s breath fell into a sleeping cadence before letting his mind drift into the comforting tide of the fade. He could sense the troubled turn of his mate’s thoughts, not yet dreaming, but primed for an uneasy sleep. He resisted the urge to calm her thoughts; reminding himself that nightmares, more often than not, served a purpose, the sleeping mind capable of grappling with troubles the waking mind resisted facing head on. As his thoughts turned from Ahrue, Era’s dreams shimmered around him. He quickly closed his mind to it, catching only a glimpse of his daughter running from a pack of feral dogs before he broke the connection.

Frightened, but safe, he told himself, grimacing inwardly at the coldness required of him in order to respect her privacy. Her nightmares were occurring at greater frequency. It could be an effect of the Vir’abelasan asserting itself while her child’s mind tried desperately to put the memories into formations that made sense to her. The nightmares could be symbolic of the memories or just symptomatic of the anxiety the power of the Well produced in her. The frightening dreams could also indicate that Era’s connection to the fade was deepening. He recalled well the terrifying intensity of his dreams when his arcane abilities had first begun to surface. It was a common experience for young somniari. But it was early for Solas to jump to such assumptions.

His mind traveled onward, passing the dreams of clan Lavellan. The Keeper dreamt of Ash’a’bellanar. Deshanna handed her a screaming infant. Ash’a’bellanar smiled, warmly at first, but the grin gradually widened further and further, until the corners of her mouth reached her ears, sharp carnivorous teeth peeking through her parted lips. Deshanna stood in frozen horror as Ash’a’bellanar opened her monstrous mouth and devoured the infant. The Keeper let out a blood-curdling scream, and her mind closed off to him in abrupt blackness. She must have woken herself in her terror.

Solas moved on, pulled gently by the sleeping mind of Achel. A teenage version of Achel was spread out on the dewy grass under the stars. Beside him, a girl whom Solas knew instantly as Ahrue in her youth starred up at the night sky, her wide eyes catching the moonlight. They said nothing, enjoying their star-gazing in quiet, comforting company. The scene created an aura of calm bliss, and Solas began to gather how much Ahrue meant to Achel.

He could have happily stayed with Achel’s mind all through the night, but Solas had other aims. He passed Hari dreaming of scrubbing a never-ending mound of clothing in a river. Every time she finished cleaning an article, the rapids would snatch it from her, as she cursed after it. Anxiety mounting, she would pick up another piece of clothing, and the pattern would repeat.

Pelev dreamed she was on a bear hunt, but kept getting distracted by impossibly beautiful flowers dotting the path. As she bent to smell a flower, the bear would sneak up behind her and smack her on the head before running away. The beast laughed as Pelev swung around with her bow, too late to shoot it.

And then Solas found the mind he’d been searching for: Hawel. The old man appeared a good thirty years younger than he was in life, his hair just beginning to grey, his body thickly muscled and broad backed. He stood on a sandy beach looking out over a vast sea, a light wind tousling his hair, the setting sun casting his darkly tanned skin in a rosy hue. Solas considered for a moment what form would be most efficacious to obtain the confession he sought from Hawel. He could appear as Deshanna, use the trust between them to convince Hawel to speak freely. He could appear as Ahrue and use Hawel’s anger to maneuver him to speak. Perhaps a vision of one of the Pantheon would inspire a contrition; as the Dread Wolf, fear could do much to loosen lips. But ultimately, Solas decided to approach Hawel as himself. After all, as vile as the man was in Solas’ eyes, he was Ahrue’s kin, not some enemy spy to toy with and torture. The Fade itself would make Hawel’s thoughts flow more readily to his tongue than they would in the waking world.

Solas approached Hawel who glanced briefly in his direction without turning his head. “Thinking
of going for a swim, Haren?” Solas asked brightly.

“Just waiting for the tide to come in,” Hawel grumbled. “Won’t be long now.”

Solas nodded. “I shall wait with you.”

Hawel snorted. “I don’t need company. And if I did, it certainly wouldn’t be yours I’d be after, flat ear.”

“And yet you have it,” Solas said calmly.

“You really have trouble recognizing when you’re not wanted, don’t you?” Hawel said shaking his head.

Solas laughed. “On the contrary! I am simply accustomed to it, and thus am little swayed by whether or not my presence is desirable. If I only went where I was wanted, I would hardly leave my home. And I would never have met Ahrue.”

Hawel grinned viciously. “Forgive me as I struggle to see the downside.”

Solas tilted his head. “And why is that? I believe I am correct in saying that I have played a significant role in making your granddaughter very happy, as she has made me. Why begrudge us that?”

Hawel’s jaw clinched. “How old is your daughter?” he asked through his teeth.

“She is five,” Solas answered cautiously, not certain where Hawel was going with this.

“Five. When Ahrue was five she would climb into my lap every night and snuggle up to me while I told the clan stories. She’d fall asleep to the sound of my voice, and I would carry her to bed and tuck her in with a kiss on her forehead.”

Solas had done the same with Era many times, though lately nightmares had made her resistant to fall asleep. Just the same, it was a familiar scene, and he knew the emotions it stirred well, though it was hard to imagine this brutal man occupying the same role as him thirty years prior.

“At that age, she understood the world through my stories. All that she learned of the importance of kin, the dangers posed by outsiders, she learned from me.” Hawel scowled at Solas. “I’m certain your daughter has learned lessons from you as well, though I’d venture not the same ones,” he said bitterly.

Solas bristled. “Nor do I instill my lessons in quite the same way as you did, Haren.” His words were thick with venom. “Era does not fear outsiders, but more importantly, she does not fear me.”

Hawel laughed. “You are naïve. And, I dare say, you will learn.”

Solas’ stomach turned at Hawel’s suggestion. “That is a lesson I will never learn.”

Hawel shook his head knowingly. “Ahrue was obedient at that age. Desperate to please. Too curious for her own good, but otherwise a tolerable child,” he said with a shrug. “Her father was the same; I never would have guessed at the shame that boy would bring me.” Hawel’s face darkened. “Just like his mother. Something in the blood made them want to stray. I would bet my good winter cloak that your little one will be no different.”

“What do you mean?” Solas asked, the mention of bloodlines tickling his curiosity.
The space around them wavered and warped. Hawel and Solas were standing in the woods. A little way off, a startlingly beautiful woman with the vallaslin of Andruil stood talking to a handsome elf who caressed her cheek. The man had no vallaslin and stood beside a horse drawn wagon, suggesting that he was no Dalish. A much younger Hawel ducked behind a tree, out of sight of the two elves.

“It gets harder to say goodbye to you every time,” the man said.

The woman smiled sadly. “I know, emma lath. But it is just a month.”

The man turned from her. “It will be a good deal longer than a month.”

Her eyes widened. “What?” She put a hand on his upper arm. “Why, Lamis?”

He sighed and shrugged. “Winter will be upon us. I won’t be able to make the journey to Nevarra while the roads are covered in snow. It will be well into Spring before I’ll make another trip.”

“Spring!” she said, tone frantic. “My clan will be travelling East come Spring!”

Lamis turned back to her, his face dumbfounded. “But why travel East? I thought the hunting here was good!”

“It… it is,” she stammered. “It’s… just our way. We never stay in one place more than two Winters. I thought you understood that.”

Lamis took a sharp intake of breath. “I… I thought as long as the hunting was good…” He broke off and hung his head, looking defeated. “This is awful.”

She took his hands in hers. “Could you not change your route?” she asked hopefully. “If you traded with Ostwick instead of Nevarra, we could still…”

He shook his head, tears beginning to cloud his eyes. “Mari, I’m a servant. I don’t get to pick who Master Smith trades with. I’m lucky he doesn’t care that I take an extra few days on my trips.”

Mari threw up her hands. “Then this is it? We are finished? Just like that?”

“No!” Lamis said pleadingly. “I can’t… I can’t let that happen.”

Mari buried her face in her hands. “What else can we do, vhenan? It has been difficult enough without the uncertainty of when we might see each other.”

Lamis kneeled in front of her and put his hands on her hips. “Then come with me, Mari.”

She pushed him gently. “I can’t. You know that.”

He smiled. “You can. Bring your son! I’ll care for him as though he were my own, I promise. We can get married, and you can work wood worker! Your delicate carvings will fetch a tidy sum from the stuffed-shirts.” He stood up and took her hands, his face alight with the joy of the future he envisioned for them. “We’ll buy a small house, just big enough for four.”

Mari laughed. “You’re a wonderful fool, emma lath. But I can’t just leave my clan.”

Lamis’ smile faded. “Believe me, sweetheart, if it wasn’t for your prick-of-a-husband, I’d offer to stay, join the clan, and leave Kirkwall behind forever.”

Mari shook her head. “Even then, our being together would hardly be simple.”
“But it can be simple, Mari,” he pleaded. “All you have to do is get Salem, and leave with me. I’ll stay here. You can wait until Hawel is asleep, scoop up your little boy, and we’ll be far from your camp before anyone even notices you’re gone.”

The scene faded and the beach and ocean returned. “You witnessed your wife preparing to leave you,” Solas said, feeling more sympathy for Hawel than he’d expected he could.

“I did,” Hawel said gruffly.

“How did you respond?” Solas asked, fearing the answer.

He shrugged. “I rushed back to camp and told the Keeper. When Mari returned a few hours later, pretending as though she’d spent the entire day gathering ironbark, the clan was ready for her. She was exiled.” The image of Mari sobbing and clinging to a toddler as the young boy was ripped screaming from her arms played on the surface of the water and then vanished. “She met her flat ear lover as she’d planned, and, as I learned later, they did indeed settle in Kirkwall,” Hawel continued. “But she would not have my son.”

Solas was relieved to learn that Hawel had not killed Mari for her indiscretion but sickened that she had been so cruelly punished for the crime of not loving her husband. And yet, could he blame the man for not wanting to be separated from his son? “And how did you explain his mother’s absence to Salem?” Solas asked. “Surely he was too young to understand what was happening.”

“I told him the truth, that his mother had fallen prey to the Dread Wolf’s trickery and been fooled into abandoning us.”

Solas gaped at Hawel. “That is a far cry from the truth. You used a myth to absolve yourself of any wrong doing.”

Hawel snarled. “Spoken like a flat ear. Fen’harel does his work through mortals, his poison wears away The People’s bonds and brings shame and death wherever his shadow passes. And you are no less his servant than Lamis was.”

“Shame and death?” Solas pressed, ignoring how personally Hawel unwittingly struck at him. “There was no death in Mari’s departure. As you said, she and Lamis settled in Kirkwall. They might live there still.”

“The death would come later,” Hawel said darkly. “Salem lived always under the shadow of his mother’s betrayal. And when he was grown, with a wife and child of his own, some foolish old woman told him the whole of the story.” Hawel hung his head, and his shoulders shuddered against the memory. “I begged him not to go, told him that it was the Fen’harel who’d twisted the old woman’s mind to distort the truth. But he was determined to find Mari. He and his wife left in the dead of night, saying farewell only to Ahrue. I was only given the courtesy of a note, saying that they would return, but they had to know the truth of what had happened to Mari and if she still lived. Just as his harelan mother had done, he abandoned his clan and his daughter to blindly follow the bidding of the Wolf. But he would not be so fortunate as Mari.”

The water shone again, and the image of a hunter pulling a stretcher with two bodies tied to it played out on the surface. The image of Hawel ran to the stretcher and collapsed in wracking sobs at the sight of his son’s still body.

Solas turned from the image to face the actual Hawel who was weeping in kind. “A month passed… with no word from Salem, so we sent out a patrol to follow the possible paths to Kirkwall,” Hawel said in a rasping voice. “One of our hunters found them, a few days from
camp... run through with shemlen blades, stripped of their belongings. Victims of their own shameful betrayal.”

“I regret your loss, but Salem did not betray or abandon you,” Solas said, feeling both compassion and contempt for Hawel in that moment. “He only wished to be reunited with his mother, a woman whom you forced to leave him. There was no shame in Salem’s actions, only love and a desire to know his own history. If you had allowed Mari to take him the night of her exile, he might have one day made a quest to find you.”

“You know nothing,” Hawel said, closing his eyes. “He left, as his mother left, as... his daughter left. Even before Mari, there was a history of her forebears being lured into betrayal. Infidelity, abandonment, spitting in the face of tradition.”

“I am certain every family is marked by such histories,” he said, yet he wondered if Mythal had some role in the sordid history of Ahrue’s family. Or perhaps it was the blood itself, as Hawel had intuited. Their blood carried the power and knowledge, however buried, of the most powerful mages in Elvhen history. Could power of that magnitude be distilled without consequences? Such people would perhaps feel stifled under the conservative and insular practices of the Dalish. They were, as Ahrue was, born to greater callings than a small clan could accommodate, but any effort to reach further would be read as betrayal. However, Mari’s ambitions had seemed ordinary, as had Salem’s. But Solas reminded himself that he had seen only a sliver of their lives through Hawel’s eyes. Mari’s own perspective on her reasons for wanting to leave the clan might have been much different. “Even if there was something unusual about Ahrue’s line,” Solas said stiffly, “You distort their motivations for leaving to protect your own ego. Mari wanted to leave because she was unhappy with you, Salem left because you had lied to him about his mother, and when Ahrue discovered she was with child, she was certain that you would never accept her. And indeed, when you learned of Era’s birth, you expressed disgust and shame, not acceptance or compassion. And need I remind you that it was Deshanna who sent her to the Conclave?”

“No,” Hawel said firmly. “I could see it in her long before she left, that shadow of the Dread Wolf that sullied her. It began with questions and doubts, just as it had with her father. She would test the limits, wander off, even converse with Fen’harel.”

Solas rolled his eyes, remembering of what Hawel spoke. “She spoke to statues. She was an imaginative child, not a kin traitor.”

“She was irreverent.”

“And is that why you struck her?” Solas asked, anger spiking.

Hawel whirled on him. “I had seen the same in Salem!” he said in a raised voice. “But I had been fool enough to largely ignore it. Ahrue needed to be taught that she was walking a path that would lead her to betrayal and death. Better she learn it by my loving hand than at the hands of the Wolf!”

Solas resisted the urge to snap back that The Dread Wolf cared for Ahrue in ways that this pathetic man could never understand. “How could abuse possibly teach her anything but fear of you?” he said, voice curled with disgust.

Hawel’s face flashed with pain briefly before regaining his indignant anger. “Do not dare judge me, flat ear,” he said in a low dangerous voice. “I failed with Ahrue, but the blame lies chiefly with you, another unwitting servant of Fen’harel, sent to erode our clan until we are dust. Deshanna sent her away before she was ready. She knew what evils plagued Ahrue’s forebears, and still she sent her, right into your path.” He poked a finger menacingly into Solas’ chest. “But we will have her back, and Era too, even if it means we have to chain you to us.”
“Is that your plan with me?” Solas asked wryly. “You think to keep me close as your enemy so as you may have Ahrue and Era under your power? You fail to understand, Hawel, that I am not your enemy, nor did Ahrue decide not to return to the clan for my sake. It is a pity you are too close-minded to comprehend her true motivations.” Solas shook his head, almost pitying the old man. “Ahrue will not rejoin the clan, and Era will never be a Dalish.”

Hawel lips curled in a twisted smile. “Mark my words, Solas, you will know my pain. Betrayal is in their blood.”

“Your perspective of betrayal comes from a worldview that cannot accommodate anything but obedience. There is nothing Era could do that would move me to strike or estrange her; I will not repeat your mistakes.” Solas frowned and his voice softened. “I had hoped you might give Ahrue some peace, that you would feel shame at your actions toward her. But I understand now that you see only your own injuries and refuse to accept your role in how they were sustained. When Ahrue tells the clan tomorrow that she will not remain, you will not accept it as her choice or as your own doing. You will call her traitor, your voice will carry more weight than it should, and the clan will refuse the accord and exile Ahrue. She will see it as her own failure, and the judgment will cut deep.” Solas shook his head, sick at the thought of his beloved feeling again like a traitor to her kin. “I cannot allow that to happen,” he said with grave certainty.

“What do you mean you ‘can’t allow that to happen?’” Hawel said, fists clenched. “If she denies her clan, then the shame of exile is well earned.”

Solas turned from him and began to walk away. “The tide is coming in, Haren,” he said, as he left Hawel to the rapidly rising sea. He’d hoped for reconciliation, but at least Hawel would do her no more harm.

After abandoning Hawel to the sea, Solas made one final visit to Deshanna, who had since returned to sleep, before allowing his own consciousness to drift freely.
The sun was not yet up when the sound of the bell stirred Ahrue from her sleep. For a moment of hazy confusion, she thought Era was banging on cooking pots. But as the haze of sleep began to clear from her mind and eyes, she recognized the only meaning that the sound might carry.

Solas grunted and pulled her closer to him. “It is very early to already be calling the morning meal,” he said, recalling the bell that had tolled the start of supper the night before.

“Too early,” Ahrue said simply. “And it’s ringing in series of four, not the two strikes that signal meals. Four means someone has died.”

Solas stiffened slightly. “Hawel,” he said darkly.

She nodded. His was the most likely death, though looking at him yesterday, she’d thought he would yet have days or weeks ahead of him.

Solas propped himself up on his elbow and his gaze rested on the space between them. “Are you alright?” he asked gently.

Ahrue searched her heart. Was she alright? Was it dread or grief that writhed nauseously in her gut? It was not much different from the day before, really. Perhaps the news required time to settle in before she would feel the particular weight or lightness of it. For now, she sat up and groaned slightly at the exertion of yesterday’s stress asserting itself in her neck and shoulders. “I’m not sure,” she said in a weary voice. “I’d thought I’d have more time to… I don’t know… something. Now he’s dead, and for good or ill, things will be always as we left them.”

Solas furrowed his brow and opened his mouth as though to speak, before pressing his lips together and looking off toward the sound of the bell. “What is expected of us?” he asked softly.

Ahrue rubbed the back of her neck, hoping to ease the pain that ached there. “Everyone will gather at the central hearth. We should join them.” She frowned, remembering other times Falon’Din’s bell had tolled. “The Keeper will announce his passing, and a fast will be kept in Hawel’s honor. Preparations will be made, and at sunset we will bury him, plant a tree over his body, and break our fast. There will be songs and dances and stories.” She sighed, feeling exhausted at the thought of it all. “It will be a long day.”

She rose and gave Solas a hand up. He took it but released her quickly once he was standing. He looked slightly away from her, and Ahrue was confused by his withdrawal. Perhaps he was unnerved by his intrusive presence at the remembrance of a man he hardly knew among people who despised him. Indeed, her clan might resent his attendance. But they would likely resent his absence even more if he stayed away.

Ahrue took his hands in her own and he looked into her eyes, his face tense against the contact. “I know this is awkward. I wish I knew of a way to make it less so.”

His expression shifted quizzically. And Ahrue began to doubt that she had interpreted his discomfort correctly.

“Are you all right?” she asked, eyes narrowed. “Is something wrong?”

His expression softened but he turned his gaze to the gathering clan and released her hands. “Nothing pressing. We should attend to the matter at hand.”
As he began to move from her, she caught his wrist, unease rising in her throat and flushing her cheeks. “If something is wrong, I’d like to know about it. If you’re upset with me…”

He turned toward her, a familiar sad smile putting her at ease some as he stroked her cheek with one hand and took her hand with the other. “Ir abelas,” he said softly. “You are blameless. I saw Hawel in the fade last night. We spoke, and…” again his eyes evaded hers. “There would be no point in burdening you with what transpired. Not now.”

“I don’t like this, Solas,” Ahrue said, worry mingling with a rising anger. Whenever he delayed a conversation this way, she had the nagging feeling that he did so to give himself time to carefully craft a lie in place of the truth. As much as she had forgiven him for past wrongs, she knew he still believed that deception was often the best course of action, even when used against her. Giving her the honesty she demanded was always a struggle for him against his nature. “Can you please just tell me now?” she asked trying to think what Hawel and Solas might have said to each other in the fade to warrant Solas’ current reaction. She could imagine any number of cruel things that might have been uttered which Solas would not wish to repeat. “It can’t be worse than what I’m imagining.”

Solas snorted and shook his head, but he was saved having to put her off again by Achel’s arrival.

“Ahrue,” Achel said softly. “Everyone is waiting for you.”

Ahrue flared her nostrils and glowered at Solas. “We’re coming,” she said to Achel as kindly as she could manage in the midst of her rising temper and walked heavily in the direction of the freshly stoked fire.

Achel walked beside Ahrue with Solas following a few paces behind them. Achel glanced backward at Solas before hooking his arm in Ahrue’s. “Is everything okay?” he said close to her ear.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes,” she said with a sigh. “Not enough sleep and all the stress over this visit just has us both at our worst.” She’d said it to get Achel to leave her be, but her words were true enough; She tended to be more irritable and Solas less communicative when they were under strain. Having said so and thus reminded herself of the truth of it, Ahrue calmed some.

“I guess that tells me how you’re holding up,” Achel said. “And I can’t imagine this will make it any easier,” he added, nodding toward the gathered clan.

She honestly wasn’t sure. She’d expected Hawel to oppose the accord once she proposed it; his death would make it easier to sway the clan to accept an alliance with the Enansal’vhen. Or it might make them more stubbornly stand by the position they would have expected him to adopt, grief magnifying their respect for their departed elder. To Achel she simply said, “I don’t think it’s really hit me yet. Or maybe it’s just too soon for me to recognize how it’s affecting me.”

“I understand,” Achel said. “Even knowing it was coming for weeks now, thinking about how I would react, how I would feel… and now that it’s happened… I just feel numb.”

“Yeah,” Ahrue said. She wasn’t looking forward to her own numbness breaking. She didn’t want to feel anything about this. She wanted to not care.

They reached the gathered clan with Deshanna and Hawel’s apprentice, a woman name Iranna, standing before them. Ahrue received glances of sympathy and irritation as her kin noted her approach. A few people’s cheeks were streaked with tears that glistened in the firelight. Deshanna looked particularly worse for ware, and Ahrue’s heart went out to her. Hawel was her brother and
closest confidant; whatever cruelty he had done to others of the clan, he was dear to her.

Solas arrived soon after and hesitantly took a place at Ahrue’s side. She smiled weakly at him and took his hand in her own to assure him that all would be well between them. He squeezed her fingers twice to show his gratitude for her gesture. They would talk later, Ahrue told herself.

With everyone now gathered, the Keeper began. “Hawel is dead,” she said in a voice that cut sharply through the scattered whispers, seeming to bring even the crickets to an abrupt silence. They waited in the quiet for several minutes, the tension steadily increasing as Deshanna stood stone-still, her reddened eyes fixed on a point in the distance. “He came to me in a dream last night,” she said at last. “He said much of the past,” Deshanna’s gaze fell on Ahrue, “and what is yet to come.”

Ahrue felt Solas tense slightly and she blanched at the thought that came to her mind. He came to Deshanna in a dream? What have you done, Solas? Ahrue asked him silently. It seemed more than likely that Solas had visited Deshanna in the guise of Hawel to manipulate her into accepting the accord Ahrue would propose. He must have felt Hawel die through the fade and seized upon the opportunity to make things easier for them. All these centuries, all the mistakes he’d made, and the high cost of those mistakes, he still thought himself entitled to maneuver others to meet his own ends. Ahrue released his hand and folded her arms. He had put her in an unfair position. If she exposed his deception, any chance of an accord would be lost and the clan might even think to punish them as traitors. The more superstitious members of the clan, the Keeper included, might even assume that Solas was the Dread Wolf to be able to so deceive Deshanna through her dreams. How tidily that would fit in Flemeth’s “prophesy!” And the clan’s retaliation would be bloody. If, on the other hand, Ahrue allowed the deception to stand, she would be complicit, proving once and for all to herself that she was indeed a harellan.

As Ahrue seethed, Deshanna continued. “All will be made known in due time. But for now, know that his final thoughts were for the love and wellbeing of his kin. On this day of mourning, hold Hawel in your hearts. At sunset we will put him to rest and he will begin his journey through the beyond, din’an’shiral. Mala suledin nadas.”

“El suledin nadas,” the clan echoed. Ahrue mouthed the words, but could not will sound to leave her lips. She wanted desperately to be wrong about Solas, wanted to believe that Deshanna had just had a dream and nothing more, or that Hawel really had reached out to her as his spirit left his body. Perhaps Solas had tensed at the Keeper’s words because he had witnessed their conversation, not because it was of his making. But the thought of him manipulating Deshanna’s dreams rang so sickeningly true, that Ahrue could not push it aside.

With the Keeper’s short speech concluded, the clan began to mill around, embracing one another, talking, beginning the chores for the day, or returning to bed to catch another hour of sleep before sunrise. Solas gently caught Ahrue’s elbow and leaned in close to her ear. “May we speak?” he asked quietly, his voice tense with urgency. He knew she knew.

“Not now,” Ahrue said removing his hand from her, her voice iced over in her anger. “You may return to bed, if you wish, but I have kin to attend to.”

“Ahrue,” he pleaded, but when her furious eyes met his he sighed and nodded. “Ma nuvenin,” he said dejectedly. “I will wait for you at our campsite.”

She said nothing more to him, only turned toward Achel whose forehead was lined with worry. She wanted Solas to stew in her anger before she granted him a chance to explain. And maybe part of her hoped that, with some time, he might fashion a lie she would believe so that she need not be burdened with the weight of choosing between betraying him or betraying Lavellan.
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