Roses Where Thorns Grow

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Roses Where Thorns Grow

by Bdafic

Summary

Approximately a month after their unexpected break-up at Crestwood, Ellana struggles to maintain a working relationship with Solas. But reoccurring nightmares and the fear that demons may be creeping into her dreams drives her to seek his aid, as much as she does not want to. When they are drawn back into a rekindled affair, Solas' guilt drives him to finally tell her the truth.

An exploration of how events might unfold following Solas' confession, and all the complicated feelings that arise from it.

Part one (chapters 1-10) is now finished.
Part two begins in chapter 11.

Notes

This began as a private sort of thought experiment I had no intention of sharing or showing anyone. But then I thought... hey, why not? Maybe someone will read it, maybe someone might even like it. So this has no plan, no outline, no grand story idea, and may not actually "go" anywhere - but here it is anyway! I have some vague idea of how I'd like to explore a rekindled affair and have a good number of chapters of it sketched out, but I've no idea when or if I'll be happy enough to post them. I tend to just edit and re-edit until I get pissed off, so I'm hoping that actually posting it online will break me of that habit. Maybe?
I have not written in 20ish years, and this will be the first time I've ever posted anything online anywhere, so it's a bit nerve-wracking for me.

Also I now have a Tumblr, so go there for questions and prompts and the like:
http://bdafic.tumblr.com/
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This first chapter contains no actual sex but might be explicit enough to warrant a warning anyway.

Also my apologies to anyone who saw the absolute mess I made of the "notes" earlier because it took me three days to figure out how they work. Holy shit I have the dumb.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Inquisitor woke suddenly, gasping for air. Adrenaline coursed through her body in pulsing waves, making her chest heave and body quake. For a terrifying moment, she could not remember where she was or what had happened to make her so afraid. Her eyes darted around the room, relief washing over her as the walls of her quarters swam into focus. Still Skyhold. She blinked her eyes heavily and took a steadying breath, making a conscious effort to take note of her surroundings: the feel of her soft bedding beneath her, the drape of her Orlesian silk duvet now twisted around her body, the light chill of the breeze through her open window as it lapped at sweat-soaked skin. The sound of her breath in the empty room.

Just a dream, she assured herself.

A nightmare.

More of them every night. Some about battle, others Corypheus, but most about Solas. They were terrible, searing dreams that left her uneasy when she woke. Nightmares were not exactly something she was unfamiliar with, but their sheer number was beginning to overwhelm her.

In one, her and Solas would argue bitterly: she would struggle to hold herself together as he hurled insults and accusations that tore at her chest, shaking loose the deepest insecurities she held about herself, her abilities and her love for him. The anger and hurt would boil inside of her as she watched his face twist and lips curl in his fury. In those moments, within the dream, she wanted nothing more than to hurt him as badly as he had hurt her. In another, he would draw her close only to cast her aside; profess he never cared for her at all and the year of painful flirtation, growing intimacy and stolen kisses were nothing but a game. A toy for him to play with until he grew weary of her entertainment.

No matter the dream, the end was always the same - she would wake in a cold sweat, gasping for breath, tangled in her sheets feeling trapped and frightened. They were becoming more and more intense as time went on; more difficult to wake herself from and the residual feelings harder to shake when she attended to her duties the following day. She was becoming afraid to fall asleep, and the exhaustion and weakness from lack of rest was starting to take a toll on her. Worse still, the toll upon her health had not escaped the notice of her comrades. She was distracted and short-tempered - easy to provoke - and it was becoming a liability. In this state she was vulnerable to manipulation and impulsive action - traits both dangerous and sloppy for a leader. It was not something she could afford to be as the Inquisitor.

Ellana pressed her palm to the bridge of her nose, allowing her eyes to close as she worked to steady her breathing once more. This had to stop. No attempt at meditation had been successful,
and no amount of soothing teas or relaxing herbs seemed to make a difference once she succumbed to sleep. If only I could push into the Fade as easily as he could, perhaps this wouldn't be an issue, she thought with a bitter laugh.

_The Fade._

A deep chill ran through her as a thought struck. Solas had once explained that demons and spirits were attracted to the dreams of those who entered the Fade heavy with emotions they fed upon. Wisdom, compassion, desire, rage. _Despair_. It would explain much about the course the dreams had taken, and why she could not seem to shake them. If this was the problem, she did not have the solution.

Unfortunately, she knew who might.

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The Inquisitor passed only one or two others on her way there; night staff finishing up the last of their chores, washing down tables or sweeping the halls. Each gave a respectful nod and a quiet, "Herald," as she passed before returning to their tasks. It was late, past midnight, and was politely assumed she was not plodding about the fortress at this hour in search of conversation.

Upon reaching the rotunda's doors she paused, a hand poised to push inside. Ellana pulled her dressing robe tighter around her body, securing the knot and steeling herself with a deep breath. The heavy wooden door opened with a long creak that echoed through the room. She quickly slipped inside and let it close behind her, lingering in the corridor to listen for any shuffling papers or telltale movement. It was silent except for the quiet rustling of the birds on their perches high above. She took a few cautious steps out of the corridor and peered into the room. His desk was empty, there was no sign of him except for the remains of a forgotten candle, the last of the beeswax pooling over the edges of its silver holder. He must already be asleep, she thought as she approached. The mix of relief and disappointment she felt at the idea was... _uncomfortable._

His desk was uncharacteristically disorganized, covered in loose papers and a clumsy pile of books. Normally, she would not rifle through his things - especially not now - but the emptiness of the atrium lent a certain boldness. Curiously, she picked up the topmost volume and opened the cover. Tevinter history. She put it down in the center of his desk and picked up the next one. More Tevinter history, this time relating to the lineages of powerful magisters. She cocked a brow as she thumbed through it, _he must be trying to find more information about Corypheus_ she thought. At least _he_ had no trouble remaining focused on their mission. Still, these were not the texts she was hoping to find. She needed something regarding demons and dreamers.

She began to search the pile in earnest, quickly picking up each book, scanning through the first few pages, then putting it down in the new pile when she found nothing to hold her interest. More Tevinter, more history, more magic, more Inquisition. She was almost embittered by his ability to devote himself so completely to his work while she struggled just to sleep at night. It was so like him to be so unaffected, and it made her seethe.

When she came to a particularly rough-looking volume, she paused. The pages were worn and irregular, and it stood out amidst a pile of clean lines and gilded edges. The binding was old and familiar; leather cording and animal skin. It looked as though it had been hand-crafted by someone who had little experience with book-making. Absently, she flipped through the pages, scanning for any hints on the book's subject. It had no publishing date in the inner cover, nor any information about the author. If anything, it resembled a journal more than any published work. Further in, she came across a large illustration of a dark and foreboding creature with six eyes. _The Dread Wolf_. With an intrigued hum, she thumbed back a few pages and began to read.
While her proficiency with written language was still evolving, she was able to understand enough to get the idea. The text was written in a mix of old Elvish and Dalish dialects of Common, and seemed to be devoted entirely to tracking the evolution of myths and legends about Fen'Harel.

There were records from at least a dozen separate clans. Some were old and their prose unfamiliar, others were similar to her own Keeper's stories. Inside the margins were quick scratches of Elvish, clearly in Solas' hand, though she could not translate it. Notes in Common said something about how the stories changed over time as they spread from clan to clan.

Was he trying to trace the origins of the legends?

It was an odd book to be in the possession of someone who holds so little regard for the Dalish and their beliefs. Solas did not keep to the gods - nor to any other gods as far as she knew - the most she could ever get from him on the subject was a suggestion that the Elvhen pantheon had once lived as warlords and nobles rather than as true deities. A year ago it would have enraged her to hear such blasphemy. She would have been callous, writing him off as a mere flat-ear; someone stripped of his culture and history, left broken and wandering, connected to the People by only virtue of his shared blood. Blood now thinned by time, distance and a life spent traveling through shem cities. But now? If she was honest with herself, she wasn't sure what she even believed in anymore.

Their experience at the Temple of Mythal had affected her deeply. Abelas, the Well and the sentinels; learning the truth of Mythal's death and standing before ancient Elves - Elvhen - her own ancestors. Those who had truly lived in the time of Arlathan... only to have them dismiss her as an ignorant child. To them she was nothing but a shadow of their race, a quickling grasping at half-remembered words and stories and building them up into tales worthy of grandiose worship. Though still naught but tales.

It was overwhelming, and strange.

Solas had talked with her before of how the Dalish's attempt at preserving their culture and history had done little more than pervert it, but she did not fully comprehend by just how much until they'd left the temple.

Ellana soon forgot about her original purpose for coming to the rotunda as she studied the strange little book. She leaned back against Solas' desk, reading through the collected versions of The Great Betrayal and finding that she regarded the tale with little more than casual curiosity, absently running her fingers over the bare skin where her Vallaslin had once been. Stories that once struck awe and fear into her heart no longer held any significance for her. Now, she could not think on them without wondering what truth was left, if any at all. It left an uncomfortable emptiness in her, and she wondered if she still held even a sliver of fear for the Lord of Tricksters anymore.

"Inquisitor?"

Solas' voice tore her from her thoughts. She jumped, startled, and turned to find him standing at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the library. He had several books cradled in one arm, and a candle in the other. His eyes drifted over her, taking in her nightclothes and robe, then settled on the tome she held in her hand. A small crease formed in his brow. "May I help you?"

She stepped away from the desk, rolling her shoulders back as she pulled herself up to her full height in a show of feigned confidence. "Yes," she answered. "I was hoping you could help me find a book." His head tilted just slightly, a nearly imperceptible movement but one she recognized as a former lover. Apprehension. Curiosity. He approached the desk and carefully placed the books he'd been carrying next to the pile she had created when she'd rifled through. Once more his eyes flitted to the tome she held in her hands, his expression a mask of reservation with the sole exception of that small wrinkle in his brow. She followed his gaze.
"An interesting choice," she remarked, holding it up. "I would have thought Dalish beliefs were akin to bedtime stories for you. Have you suddenly developed an interest in learning of our nursery rhymes?" It came out icier than she'd intended, but she found she did not truly care if her words offended him.

Solas narrowed his eyes, though his tone remained even. "It is always a good idea to familiarize one's self with lore, even the parts that are deeply biased and flawed. The observation of religious beliefs between clans varies considerably, customs and greetings included. Our dealings as the Inquisition take us to the Dalish from time to time. For diplomacy's sake, I thought it prudent to learn what I can." He extended a hand toward her, palm up, indicating he would like the book returned. Ellana considered him a moment before obeying, watching as he moved the curious tome to the bottom of the pile. "I doubt this was the book you were looking for - what did you need?" He was cool and detached. Professional.

Ellana cleared her throat. "I was hoping to find something on the subject of demons and dreams."

"Specifically?"

"How they are attracted, how to combat them; how to prevent them from interfering with a dreamer in the Fade."

Solas considered her a moment, thinking, then gestured for her to follow. "Come." He turned and started back up the stairs toward the second level of the rotunda, Ellana following a few steps behind. He explained as he walked, "Demons approach dreamers in the Fade to feed upon them; they are drawn by what they can consume. Desire to lust and need, Rage to anger, and so on. Having a host die would eliminate their food source, so do not seek to consume entirely but rather to possess and extort what they can, usually by creating a setting that works to convince the dreamer that what they experience in the Fade can be real outside of it, or by seducing them into becoming a willing host."

"I know," Ellana interrupted curtly. "You've told me all of this before."

He glanced over his shoulder, his expression softening. "My apologies."

An uncomfortable silence fell over them as Solas led her toward one of the library's many alcoves. When he stopped, she stayed a few steps behind him, watching him stand before a shelf of old tomes, drawing two fingers across the spines, searching. As the silence stretched on she became very aware of how exposed she was standing there in little more than her shift and robe. She pulled one side of her robe tighter around her body and folded her arms across her chest. But if he was put off by her appearance, he did not let it show.

"It would help if I had more information to refine my search," said Solas. He did not turn away from the texts, pulling one from the shelf and scanning through the first few pages before returning it. "Is there a particular demon you're interested in learning about?"

She hesitated, opening her mouth to answer only to stop herself and chew at her bottom lip instead. When no reply came, Solas paused, regarding her patiently.

"Despair," she answered finally.

She watched the emotions play out over his features in subtle twitches and knots as he put the pieces together: confusion, curiosity, understanding, sadness. Pity.

"Ah."
What little confidence she had managed to cultivate before all but disappeared as she saw him avert his gaze. "Ellana-" he began. It was the first time he had used her name in at least a week. "Are you having nightmares?" All the chill had left his voice now, replaced with a softness that made her stomach twist as much as it made her bristle.

She scoffed, a denial ready on her lips, but there was something in the way he looked at her now that made her reconsider. A tenderness she'd desperately craved, as much as she would not dare admit it. She avoided his gaze, choosing to stare at her feet instead. "Yes."

He took a step forward, hand extending as though to touch her, only to pull it away. Instead he tucked it behind his back in a loose fist. The brief flash of tenderness was quickly brushed aside. "If that is truly what plagues you, you must take care not to enter the dream as a target. Despair is the perversion of hope. To combat it, one must arm themselves with its opposite; to work toward shedding what lingers. Harden your heart, and reshape the hurt into your armor."

The shout of bitter laughter that burst from her made him flinch. "So that's it then?" She flicked her wrist in a dismissive gesture. "Just, 'get over it'?"

He was quiet a long time. The crease in his brow grew deeper with each passing second. "I'm sorry I cannot offer more."

She fixed him with a cold glare and her lip twitched, threatening a sneer. "Thanks, Solas. Really. For everything."

It would have been better to turn and leave. To drop it there; take the anger he had given her and use it as a shield against her sorrow and her nightmares. To try and take his advice and pray it worked. But there was something in his face that anchored her. A hint of sympathy and sadness she could now see had been hiding somewhere underneath all the cold apathy he had offered her over the past few weeks. It drove her to remain - to push - out of spite. He had tipped his hand, revealing his guilt in that moment of tenderness, and she wanted nothing more than to hurt him with it.

"I suppose it's easy for you, isn't it?" Bitterness and anger bled from every word. She was needling him and they both knew it. "Just turn away and continue on as though nothing happened? Attracting the attention of a Despair demon would never be a risk for you, would it?" A brief, pained expression flickered across his face. For a moment she wondered if her words had actually hit their mark.

"Practiced does not mean painless," he answered softly.

She scoffed. "You'll forgive me if I find that difficult to accept. Tell me, Solas," she spit, her eyes narrowing. "Does any part of you feel remorse or regret? Not for leaving, obviously, but perhaps just for throwing me away as readily as you did?" A nostril stung - a hint at what was to come - and she clenched her jaw against the pain, determined not to let him see her break. "You could have just as easily kept me strung along for much longer, you know. I truly had no idea I mattered so little to you - you fooled me far too well. Did you ever love me?"

The answer came with more warmth than she'd expected. "Ar tel'dian."

"No. No, no, no, I will not let you do this to me."

Rage surged in her chest, rushing into her limbs, pushing her forward until she found she'd closed the distance between them and stood mere inches away. "M'harell!" she screamed, and her voice echoed through the empty hall. Her hands were balled into fists so tight at her sides that her nails left deep crescents in her skin. Fevered and furious breaths made her chest heave and nostrils flare.
All attempts to remain calm had been abandoned; now she stoked her ire and let the anger course through her veins like fire.

He did not so much as flinch at her curse, but his eyes held hers for a long moment before falling to the floor. And his hands hung loose at his sides. He looked defeated, and the furious part of her wondered if it wasn't just an act. Some twisted, back-handed ploy to ease her shameful pining with an illusion that he was hurting, too. But then he spoke, and his voice was taut and pained. "Ir abelas, vhenan."

If he'd thought the endearment would soften her fury, he was sorely mistaken. If anything, it ignited it. The thundering of her pulse in her ears made her head spin. And her hands were shaking, clawing at the air as her mind struggled to find purchase on something - anything - some piece of this that she could tear off and throw back at him. To make his heart clench the way hers did when he called her vhenan after all he'd done. The word was spoken with a quiet honesty that made her temper falter, and she struggled to push the pain aside as she spit curses through clenched teeth. "Tel'abelas, harellan."

This time, he did react - a wince - visible through the cracks in his mask. Except there was more than just little cracks now: it was slipping away. The longer they stood in the darkened library trading anger and hurt the more she could see hints of what he hid beneath weeks of cold, embittered distance. For all his poise and polite arrogance there was a sea of unspent emotion toiling somewhere inside him. She could see it in the way his shoulders slumped with each long exhale. The way his hands hung limp at his sides and his fingers rubbed across his thumb as he spoke. He stood silent and still beneath a mountain of her rage, his eyes searching her face for... something. She could not possibly know what. Some answer to a question she'd never hear him ask.

Then, it hit her. It was not pain for himself that welled in his eyes, but for her. He looked at her mournfully. Piteously. As though she were a small and pathetic thing. The thing he'd cast aside and now felt sorry for because she could not stop loving him as much as she hated him. The thing to which he now offered quiet lies and comforting pats, like she were a heartsick puppy that followed him home. How big of him to try and soothe her weary heart.

The thought disgusted her.

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes and the knowledge that she was that close to breaking down only made the pain of their confrontation worse. He pitied her. This was not love, this was a disease - and his spurious oaths and endearments were poison in her ears. You do not walk away from your heart so easily.

Weeks of anger, confusion and hurt she had been holding back began to well inside her. It boiled up from a deep and dark place in the pit of her stomach and spread white-hot through her body, exploding, twisting her face into a feral snarl even as her eyes grew wet. It was overwhelming.

The act began before she'd even had the thought to perform it.

And Solas caught her by the wrist a second before her hand connected with his cheek. The shock of it made her gasp. Both the realization that she had tried to hit him, and the speed of his deflection. His fingers held her wrist firmly, and though he loosened his grip when it was clear she was not going to fight him, he did not release her entirely. He stared at her, unflinching. And the pitying look that had prompted her rage just a moment before had slipped into something far more vulnerable now. The last remains of his mask had been torn away by her attempt at violence and it laid him bare in a way she had never seen before. There was guilt and sadness and so much
pain in his eyes it was a wonder he could ever hide it away.

Her heart pounded relentlessly. Chest tight and breath hitching - her body betraying her the last shreds of defiance she'd so wished to show him. She could not turn away. Instead, she stared back, knowing he would see her eyes well with tears and hating how small she felt. A deep and heavy breath shook her chest - then another, and another - and then she was choking back a sob that would release a torrent if she dared let it past her lips. She was trapped in this moment, and the worst of it was the part of her that did not want to be freed. Her skin burned like a brand where his fingers touched her, and she craved it. His closeness. Him. She did not want him to let her go.

With that realization came a storm. Hurt, desperation and of the pain of love lost welled within her and she let her eyes slip closed - surrendering - lips parting to feed the sob she could no longer contain.

Only to feel the press of his mouth instead.

She stilled, confused, though she did not pull away. The kiss was delicate - but impulsive - desperate to convey a message that words could not. It was an offering, and an apology.

_I did not wish to hurt you._

It did not ask for anything more than her willingness to accept it, and even in this moment there was nothing she could summon to stop herself from returning it. The tears caught in her lashes slid down her cheeks as she melted into his embrace. She was helpless. The taste of his kiss was a balm on her broken heart though she knew it would kill her when he pulled away.

Slowly, his fingers released her wrist and slid along her arm. At her elbow, he curled his fingers just slightly, pulling her in. When she pressed into him, his hands moved to her hips, holding her in place. Tender, loving, just as before. His kiss held her bottom lip between his own with a tentative sort of gentleness she had not felt from him when they were lovers; even in their first, questioning touches.

It hurt terribly to need it this much.

It hurt far worse to need more.

The kiss broke with a soft sigh against her skin and a delicate brush of his lips. But he did not let her go. Instead, he leaned back just enough for her to meet his gaze, and she found his eyes brimming with something desperate he would not dare give voice to. And in that moment, she believed what he'd said.

_Ar dian'tel._

_Vhenan_

She could not hold onto her anger here.

Slowly, carefully, Ellana ran her hands up over his chest and around his shoulders. Then lightly, squeezed them. An invitation. He tensed, breath hitching, but did not move away. Inside him a war was raging: desire and duty, sense and need. She could feel it in the way his fingers gripped her hips, pushing and pulling all at once. But his eyes found her mouth, throat bobbing with a hard swallow, and then he wet his lips. And when he slated his mouth against hers for a second time she could not stop the whine that bubbled up from her throat. This time his kiss was not a gentle, quiet apology. This kiss was dangerous: laced with a question neither dared to ask.
Once her hands found his body her touch became frantic. Fingers raked across his scalp, played at the edges of his ears, ran down his jaw, neck, and curled around his collar. She was starved for his skin, and if his choked moans and hissing breaths were any indication, he was just as hungry for hers. Trembling hands fist the front of his jacket and held tight, terrified that if she let go for even a second he would disappear.

The kiss deepened as tongues pressed for entry - she could not be sure whose was first - but hungry mouths answered without a moment's hesitation. She pulled at his lip with her teeth, biting gently, and the deep rumble of his moan made her stomach flip. A deep flush spread across her chest and cheeks as tongues and lips played; sucking, licking, exploring. The burn between them slowly building, pain and anger feeding into desperation and hunger. What began as slow and tentative was quickly tumbling into something neither could have anticipated; a surge of passion driving them both to madness. She did not understand, could not understand, and she both hated and loved him so madly in this moment that she couldn't tear herself away even as it threatened to rend her apart.

Solas' wove his fingers deep into her hair and pulled, drawing a sudden cry from her that made his hands jump to cradle her neck instead. He was rough - frayed and frenzied in a way she'd never thought him capable. This was a side of him he had carefully restrained and it was only now in their frenzied embrace that she was seeing how much he desired.

Desired her.

The thought sent a wave of molten pleasure through her body, and it drove her to distraction. All she could feel was his hands on her, nails digging into her skin, tearing at her like a starving wolf greedy for her taste and she loved every horrible second of it. She could not think of how this could keep going, how it could end, how it even began and yet she could not care enough to stop it. Somewhere at the back of her mind a voice warned her this was wrong - that they should stop - but then his hips were pushing against her, urging, and suddenly she walking backward with quick, clumsy steps until he had her thrown against a shelf. And any thought she might have had after that simply flew away. The impact knocked several books to the floor but neither seemed to notice nor care. Not when his hands were on her body and she could taste his need in the deft movements of his tongue. Soft groans and hitched breaths filled the air, and she writhed beneath the press of his body. Blood singing and body clenching with need. And oh, how she needed him.

She lifted her foot to run a toe up the back of his calf. It was a tease, a subtle ploy to urge him closer, but his response was so sudden and intense it was near involuntary: he wrapped a hand around her thigh and yanked it hard, bracing it high against his hip. The movement angled her hips down, shifting her center of gravity, and she would have lost her balance if not for the push of his thigh between her legs. Before she could even begin to process the new position he was rubbing his thigh against her groin in a slow aching rock that had her gasping. When her hips gave an involuntary jerk against his next press his chest rumbled with a deep, satisfied moan. The soft whimpers she gave seemed to embolden him. There was no trace of that careful reserve in the deft fingers that ran up the underside of her thigh, probed beneath her robe without thought or question, and then raked across the curve of her ass when he found her bare. A deep, guttural groan followed, the sound was full of unrestrained pleasure it took everything in her not to tear off his clothes then and there. There was no mask left; no paltry excuses to keep her at a chaste distance. This was the raw passion he'd been hiding just under the surface throughout their relationship. A deep well of touch-starved desperation that she'd only seen hinted at in the cracks of his veneer when they were lost in their most intimate moments.

But even those most passionate had been nothing like this. And it made her want to see more.
She tested a roll of her hip into his groin, finding him painfully hard and delighting in the shuddering moan he gave in response. He wasn't just simply in need of her touch, he was desperately aroused by it. The feel of his erection pressed against her body sent a jolt of heat straight to her core. It twisted and curled within her, and she found herself aching in a way she hadn't in years. He'd never been so bold even when they were lovers; had never given into the desire to touch her this way even as she pleaded for it. Though she knew he wanted to, he never gave in - and no amount of urging had ever seen him crack. This was different. This was driven by a heady and bewildering mix of pain, anger, desire, loneliness and desperation that urged them forward even as they knew it wasn't right. It should stop. It should never have started at all. This was over, he had made that clear.

*Hadn't he?*

It didn't matter now. Nothing seemed to matter. The thoughts banished to the void as Ellana snaked a hand down his body, flipping open the latch of his belt and pulling at his jacket. She needed to feel his skin, to touch him as he did her. Eager fingers dug beneath the layers of clothes, pushing up his thin tunic and *finally* finding the bare skin she sought. His muscles twitched and fluttered under her touch, breath hitching as she explored every line and plane of his chiseled form. He was broad and tall for an elf; more so than any other Elven man she'd seen or been with. Exploring him was a wonder, and so her touch was anxious and eager. It made her feel like a bumbling virgin, clumsy in her impatience and hungry for everything at once. But the brief embarrassment passed when she felt his body flush with heat, gooseflesh rising wherever her nails drew over his skin. He did not resist even as she tugged at his breeches, fingertips peeking beneath the hem at his backside. Questioning and curious. She had never touched him this way, either - though she had longed to - and her heart was hammering against her ribs in anticipation. He shuddered when her nails raked against the curve of taut muscle, and a distant part of her wondered how long it had been since he'd had a lover. He was sensitive and starved like a man who had forgotten what love felt like.

Somewhere in the haze of desire she became aware of his hand wandering toward the knot on her dressing robe. He tugged hard, loosening it somewhat but failing to undo it completely. Impatient fingers abandoned a second try, instead probing beneath the layers, reaching in to palm her breast through her shift. When his thumb rolled across her nipple, pinching it lightly through the rough linen, she was moaning into his mouth. Heat coiled in her belly and she writhed with the sensation, hips wantonly rutting against his own and reveling in the hitched, stuttering breaths he gave after each rolling pass of his arousal. The press of his erection was like steel, only the thin layers of his breeches and smalls between it and her core, and it made her clench with need. She wondered if he could feel her heat. He must, she decided, because he held his hips so still against her rolls and with her hands on his ass she could feel the ripples of tension in his muscles each time he struggled not to buck into the movements. He was hanging onto a thread of self-restraint and they both knew it.

*He wants this. He wants me, and I want him desperately.*

The hand gripping her rear began to sneak lower, his palm dragging down under the curve of her ass, fingers curving inward so they brushed against sensitive skin. She shuddered, pulse drumming in her ears as his little finger crept over just enough to feel her wetness spreading down her thighs; and she knew he felt it too when his nails curled into her skin. A needy whine escaped her lips. He swallowed audibly, and his hips stuttered against the next roll.

*Gods and creators, please...*

A loud slam of a door downstairs echoed across the rotunda, and abruptly, they parted. A servant passing through what they believed was an empty office, continuing on toward the kitchens as they
finished their nightly chores.

The second the weight of his body left her own she felt empty. It was as though he tore her heart from her chest as he took a panicked step back. Her curled fingers were left hanging in the air, silently pleading for his return. She blinked in confusion, brows knit, searching his face for some sort of explanation for what had just happened. What was happening now. His cheeks and ears were flushed a deep red, a colour she'd never seen on him, but rather than arousal his face only reflected a sort of horrified embarrassment. His eyes darted nervously from from side to side, back to her, then away again. He shook his head, both hands rubbing roughly up his face. Ellana watched him curiously, struggling to slow her heaving breaths and awkwardly tugging at her shift. "Solas?" she tested. Her voice was rough and hoarse. She took a step forward.

And immediately he took a step back, breathing hard. "I-I'm sorry," he stammered. Flustered. She'd never seen him flustered. He averted his gaze, repeating the apology a little louder, "I'm sorry, Ellana. I should-- I should not have--"

"Solas, what--?" She stepped towards him, hand extended, but stilled when he threw both of his up in defense.

"No," he said sharply, then looked to her uneasily as though surprised by the force of his own voice. He shook his head again, closing his eyes, then turned and walked briskly toward the staircase.

Her confusion quickly turned to pained desperation. "Solas!" she cried again, his name catching on a sob. But he did not stop or turn around. The wave she'd held back broke over her with a feeble cry and she watched, helpless, as he disappeared down the stairs and out of sight.

He had to get away from her. Somewhere. Anywhere. Confident strides quickened to panicked stumbling down flights of stairs, through hallways, past the confused expressions of the lingering night staff as he shakily smoothed his uneven clothes and struggled to tuck in the loose corner of his tunic. He pushed his way through Skyhold's corridors, out into the night air, until finally finding his quarters. The moment the door closed behind him he was overtaken. The weight of it all pressing so hard against his chest that his body was wracked with silent sobs. It was so intense and so powerful he thought he'd drown beneath the tide. Hurt, guilt, desire, lust, anger, self-loathing swirled within him; powerful and unbridled. His back pressed against the door, and slowly his body slid down until he was seated on the floor. Resting his head in his palms and shuddering.

How could he have been so foolish? So incorrigibly selfish? How could he let his desire wrest away his self-control so easily? It shamed him to know how far the moment would have taken them had he not been startled to his senses by the slamming of a door.

Why did you kiss her, you damnable fool?

But he knew the answer. He loved, he wanted, he needed - it was so easy to fall into her. He could not tear himself away when he saw the pain in her eyes, knowing he had caused it.

It would have taken mere moments for their heated groping to devolve into hungry, desperate rutting in a library alcove; aching to soothe her pain and slake his guilt by giving into the need he had worked so hard to suppress. To take it all back. To forget. Everything. To simply lose himself in her body and her love. Those delicate fingers running along his skin leaving fire wherever they touched. The intensity of his desire for her was far more than he'd anticipated, and when the moment found them he was helpless to it's power. He wanted her. Desperately.
Ar lath ma, vhenan. Ir abelas, ir abelas, ar lath ma.

He felt it every time he looked at her. Every time he caught her looking at him, her face drawn with fury and hurt. Hurt he had caused her by allowing their entanglement to continue. He allowed himself to fall for her, encouraged her flirtation and responded in kind. He never should have let it go so far and fallen so deep. It was unacceptable, and she deserved far better than to have been toyed with this way. This was a mistake - another note in a long line of regrets of a selfish and foolish old man.

If he could leave, he would. It would make it far easier for both of them. But they were too close to the end now, and he could not abandon the Inquisition, nor her, in their hour of need. This was his fault; he had to do what he could to fix it. He owed her that much.

He would simply have to redouble his efforts; put more distance between them, and be stronger. Colder. Resist the urge to care for her and respond to her pain with a comforting touch and kind words - it would not help her get through this, and it would not ease his guilt. As weak as he was, he did not think he could stand to even maintain a friendship with her. At least, not until he could push this - all of it - away. Until he could look at her again without feeling...

Without feeling.

The sting he felt at those thoughts surprised him. If he was honest with himself, he knew he would not have the strength to be cruel and distant when he was still so deeply in love. When he knew he would always love her. And when his desire for her could be drawn to the surface with barely a brush of her fingers on his touch-starved skin.

And above all, he dreaded the knowledge that he would have to face her and twist the knife again after this... dalliance.

He should have pushed her away.

You are a selfish, selfish man.

He sat on the floor of his room, face buried in his hands, for what seemed like hours. Breathing, thinking, trying to put himself back together and cool his burning skin. But her body had been soft, and her breasts fit so perfectly in his hands. It was impossible to calm himself when every gasp and moan she'd made echoed in his ears and the smell of her body lingered on his clothes.

Slowly, almost painfully, he forced himself to retreat back into his facade of quiet reserve. The shaking breaths began to deepen and slow. With a final shudder, he pulled at his face with both palms and sighed. Then pinched the bridge of his nose between a thumb and forefinger.

"So much hurt. Twisting, tearing, sick and searing. Sundered apart, but you wish you weren't. Why?" Cole's voice was quiet and pleading.

Solas was not sure how long the spirit had been there - for once, he had not sensed his arrival - but he was certain it was his emotional state that had drawn him. Cole visited him often when he was alone, flitting in and out without warning. At times it was simply to talk, or to seek his aid in understanding their companions. The boy would come to him light, curious and full of questions. Now, he was quiet - reserved - perched on the edge of Solas' bed with his hands clasped between his knees and his face hidden beneath a fringe of messy hair.

Solas took a deep breath in through his nose, steadying himself before replying. "You cannot heal this, Cole."
"I want to. You want to. She wants to. She would understand."

He shook his head. "I cannot take her down this path with me."

"Why?"

"Because I--" he stopped, considering his answer, then began again. "It is too much to put upon her, and it would be selfish and unfair. And I have been terribly selfish already. This is not her battle; she has her own, and I would not add to her already impossible burden. I have done enough to her." After a pause, he whispered, "And she deserves far better than what I can give."

"You don't know," Cole pressed. "She loves, accepts, wants, needs. She needs to understand. Confusion and pain. Why? Why did he press after pulling away? Why deny that he desires? You were so cold before; and your heat soothes her ache. She is hungry for knowledge, for you - as you are for her - she would want to know."

"Stop, Cole." Irritation sharpened his voice. "You cannot heal this."

The spirit fell silent, looking down at the floor. Several moments passed before he spoke again. "But you could."

He sighed, defeated.

"I know."

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Ar tel'dian = I never stopped.
Ir abelas = I'm sorry
vhenan = Ya'll know this one by now, c'mon
Ma'harel = You lie
Tel'abelas, harellan = you're not sorry, liar/betrayer
Ar lath ma = I love you
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Short and bittersweet. Some character development.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dorian found her on the battlements the next morning. A thin, autumn jacket pulled tight around her shoulders was all that protected her from the chill of the mountain air. Her cheeks and nose were red from the cold, as were her fingertips where they clutched at her shoulders. She didn't seem to care. That wasn't a terribly good sign, he decided.

Slowly, he strolled up beside her, hands clasped behind his back. "Out for a morning walk?" he greeted,

She gave him a weak smile before turning her eyes back to the mountains. "Yes, I suppose."

The conversation died there. He followed her gaze out beyond the cliff's edge to where a pair of young wyverns were circling. They were no threat to Skyhold, not only too far away but also clearly too interested in each other to bother with approaching.

The warm morning light picked silver and green highlights off their scaled bodies; long and lean as they twisted through the air. Elegant. One was slightly larger than the other - a little darker, with a row of small horns around its neck. The smaller of the two had a blush of reddened scales on its belly that seemed to light up when it turned onto its back. They were beautiful. The smaller passed underneath it's partner, tail twisting and curling in its wake but not quite touching the other. Great wings spread and forearms pulled at the air, giving it a burst of speed that it used to curl itself backwards, making another sleek pass underneath it's ally. It gave a great, crooning cry as the larger one pulled its wings up, almost cradling the smaller, before pulling away at the last second.

A mating dance, Dorian realized. As one approached the other would draw back, teasing and testing, goading its partner to seek it out. The larger would persue, the smaller would run, then they would twist together and start the dance anew.

He turned his eyes back to Ellana. She watched their dance with a distant sort of sadness in her eyes that he'd come to see an unfortunate amount of over these last few weeks. It wasn't hard to understand why.

Ellana had always been a deeply private person. On one hand she was an unapologetic flirt, always easy to joke with, a fantastic drinking partner and one of the most wonderfully caring friends he'd ever made... but she held her cards close to her chest, and even in times of obvious strife he could rarely get more out of her than a vague admission that she was hurting, let alone what had caused it. He wasn't sure where the hesitation came from - at first he worried that it was because he was a human, or Tevinter at least, but over time it became clear she wasn't that kind of person. Whatever had broken her willingness to trust had happened long before he'd come along. But with patience, kindness, and a terrible sense of humour, he'd managed to cultivate a deep friendship and understanding that had come to lean on. At least a little. Though he truly wished she would more
often. It was abundantly clear in times like this one, as she stood punishing herself in the biting wind - with her bare feet and thin clothes, wistfully staring at the would-be lovers and clearly a mess of broken heart and lack of sleep - that he thought she could really use a shoulder to cry on.

They had that in common at least, the two elves: their damnable emotional reservation. Maybe it was an elf thing. Perhaps that's what drew them together in the first place - spending an agonizingly long year picking little threads of love and tenderness out of each other in bits and blobs. It took so much out of her to trust another with her heart, and look what the ass had done to it.

"He's not worth it, you know," Dorian offered with a sigh. "Your pining."

The corner of her lip twitched. Almost a smile, but not quite. "He kissed me," she said. "Last night."

It was a wholly unexpected admission. She'd never confided in him so readily, and he could do little to hide his surprise. His brows went up. "Truly?" he blustered. As solemn as the moment was, it was almost exciting that she would tell him this at all.

She tilted her head toward him, the little twitch spreading into a small, twist of a smile. "It was wonderful. And so... passionate," she said, a little shyly. Colour crept into her cheeks. "For a moment I even thought he might..."

He grinned. "That's wonderful! Take him to bed!"

The smile dropped then, and she turned her attention back to the mountains. Back to the teasing dance of the wyverns. "But then he apologized and ran off."

"That's horrible. Throw him off a cliff."

She gave a huff of laughter, a hollow sound, and Dorian offered her an apologetic smile. She looked small and vulnerable, especially in light of her admission, and so he slung an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a sideways hug, holding her tightly until he felt her release of some of her tension and she finally let her head fall against his chest.

They stood in silence for a while, watching the beasts continue their dance amidst the mountains and valleys. Teasing, testing, approaching and retreating. Never getting quite close enough to touch. A game of cat and mouse. *Apt*, thought Dorian darkly.

He pressed a chaste kiss to the top of Ellana's head, then tucked it under his chin. "It's not you, you know," he said gently. Then, less gently, "I'm not sure what in the *void* his problem is because it's clear he cares for you, but know that the problem is his and not yours. You deserve far better than this rubbish and if you had any sense you'd tell him where to stuff it and go find someone who will treat you to the best sex of your life. Maker knows you need it."

That awarded him another small laugh, weak and quiet. Then a sharp gasp that let out into a shudder. Almost a sob. Her shoulders tightened again. "I love him," she whispered.

He sighed. "I know you do." He paused and took a deep breath before adding, "We don't get to choose who we fall in love with."

And with that, she broke.

A heavy, deep sob wracked her body and her hands leapt up to cover her face in shame. She couldn't hold it back anymore. Dorian wrapped his other arm around her back and held her tighter,
turning her so she could bury her face in his lapel and muffle the sounds of her breakdown. "Come here," he urged, running a hand up her back to cradle her head. He whispered quietly at her ear. "There we go." It was a long time coming, and she needed it, he knew. She sobbed openly, loudly, face smothered in her hands for a long moment before she finally let her fingers curl around the edges of his jacket and bury her face in his clothes. Finally allowing him close enough to be the friend she needed.

It was painful to see her like this, and the more she pined the more difficult he was finding it to balance his love for her and his anger at Solas in a way that wouldn't result in him doing awful (but well-deserved) things to the man.

He wouldn't, of course - she'd hate him for that.

And if there was any chance of the two of them ever reconciling it would only happen if he stayed out of it. But oh, he really, really didn't want to. He allowed himself a small, private smile at the thought of sending a particularly well-aimed shock of lighting at the elf and seeing that damnable look wiped off his face as he fell flat on his back. Maybe then he'd spit a particularly nasty barb about what a terrible ass - and worse lover - he'd been to a woman who cared so deeply for him.

Yes, Dorian decided, that would be deeply satisfying.

In his arms, Ellana's sobs slowly began to ebb and small, hitched breaths took their place. But she didn't let go of his jacket, and she kept her face buried deep in his chest. After a while she turned her head to one side, nuzzling him a little, and took a deep breath of cold air. He pressed his cheek to the top of her head and ran his fingers through her hair, wondering how long it had been since she'd cried at all, let alone while curled up to someone. When he found a tear-streaked weft of hair on her cheek he gingerly pulled it back and tucked it behind a pointed ear, taking a moment to run a finger around the edge of it. He felt her smile a little at the tender gesture. The silence stretched on, and slowly her breathing returned to normal and the sniffling stopped.

He tested a joke. "Are you sure you don't want me to do something unseemly to him? I promise I won't kill him. Not yet anyway." Another sob, but he could hear the smile in it. He gave a kiss to her temple.

"No," she said. Her voice rasped, but her tone, at least, was lighter than before. "Though I will let you know if I change my mind."

"Please do, my dear. I'm becoming impatient. That elf had it coming even before all this mess."

She laughed, and this time it felt more sincere. Another, more comfortable silence fell between them and it was a while before she spoke again. "I have to go to Redcliffe."

"When?"

"A few days from now," she answered. "Josephine asked me to send her my recommendation for an escort party. I should have three come along - including a mage, just in case. It's just diplomatic nonsense - nothing dangerous - but it's supposed to take a week. Travel and all."

Dorian sniffed. "You should take him."

"I was thinking about it," she admitted. "Is that terrible?"

"What?" he said, feigning innocence. "Trapping him for a week in a mission where he's obligated to stay by your side just so you can corner him and demand he stop fucking around and actually decide whether or not he wants to fuck you? Of course not, that's perfectly delightful."
Her body shook with silent laughter. "I am terrible."

"Nonsense my dear, you're perfectly fuckable." She swatted his arm, and his laughter joined with hers. It was a wonderful sound, and he was glad to hear it again. "It is a bit terrible," he admitted. "But not wholly so. To be perfectly honest getting him cornered is probably your best chance of getting a real conversation out of him, if that's what you want."

Her fingers twitched against his edges of his jacket. She swallowed. "It is, I think."

Dorian raised a brow. "Don't be too sure now."

She scoffed. A pause, and then, "He'll refuse."

"Of course he will."

"He'll suggest I take you instead."

"I have a million better things to do."

She looked up at him. Her eyes were red, but they looked brighter than before. "Vivienne?"

Dorian tilted his head, brow raised. "She probably has some draperies to order. Speaking of orders, make it one. Even he can't refuse the Inquisitor. You're still his boss." He narrowed his eyes. "Come to think of it, why haven't you just ordered him to your bed? Have him make up for lost time."

The burst of laughter came so unexpectedly that she snorted, raising a hand to cover her mouth. "Somehow I don't think that would solve things," she managed through giggles.

He grinned wickedly. "Oh no? Worked for me."

"Dorian!" She looked positively scandalized, but failed to hide the small quirk of her smile. He ran his fingers over the curl of his mustache in response and flashed her a wicked grin. The smallest bit of pink crept into her cheeks before she shook her head, then knocked it against his chest. He laughed, loosely folding his arms around her back. Less a hug and more of a friendly embrace.

After a moment of quiet, she spoke again. "Thank you, Dorian."

He gave her a light squeeze. "Anytime, my love."

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr, for updates, DA:I stuff and prompts:
http://www.tumblr.com/bdafic
This took forever - weeks, actually - because I was so unhappy with the argument. Think I'm good now. Next chapter will be NSFW. Lets see how long it takes me to be happy with that!

"No'? I don't believe I gave you that option, Solas."

It was clear Ellana's tentative hold on her patience was slipping. However, she had not exactly had a firm grasp on it when she first stormed into the rotunda. The reply he had written crushed between her hands before she threw it on his desk. The ball of paper skittered to a stop next to his hand. He glanced at it for the briefest second, but gave no further acknowledgement. He did not wish to give her any indication that would engage in a debate with her about the issue.

Her glare was like a brand and it was burning a hole in him, but Solas avoided her gaze and made no move to stop working. He had spent the last several days creating charcoal rubbings of the shards they had found during a previous excursion to the Emerald Graves. After, he would disappear into the solitude offered by the basement archives to catalogue his work in the hope of translating some of the faded glyphs that many of the artifacts featured. It was work, yes, but it was busywork. This was not a pressing job by any means and there was no deadline. It was a matter borne more of curiosity than necessity, but it served its purpose as an excuse to avoid her. And now, to avoid leaving Skyhold with her.

He knew Josephine had arranged for the Inquisitor to attend to several diplomatic needs over the next few weeks; journeys that would inevitably require a small escort party. After their embrace, Solas suspected she might attempt to conscript him. To get him alone with her long enough to have the confrontation they both knew was inevitable. At this stage, having her corner him was something he very much wished to avoid. He did not trust himself alone - even nearly alone - with her after... everything. Particularly not for an entire week.

As expected, a runner had dropped the missive on his desk the previous morning.

Master Solas,

Your attendance has been requested in the escort party of Inquisitor Ellana Lavellan as she travels to Redcliffe. The party will leave in two days, one hour after breakfast. The trip is expected to take one week: five days for travel and two nights in the city. Please pack accordingly. Party rations, as well as a small stipend, will be provided for you to use as needed.

Thank you,

Josephine Montyliet
After some reflection, he had decided it was best to give Ellana his answer by letter rather than in person. There was far less chance of her drawing him into an argument that way.

In the days following their kiss, her duties had gratefully kept her occupied enough that he had not needed to work terribly hard to avoid her. However, that did not stop him from making the extra effort. He continued on much as he had before their embrace - and since he had left her in Crestwood - by absorbing himself deeply in whatever work he could find during the day, taking great care to ensure he kept busy enough not to risk any opportunity for his thoughts to wander. The last few nights he had taken the additional precaution of retiring to his quarters far earlier than was typical in the hope it would prevent her from seeking him out in the evenings. It had not gone quite as well as he had expected. Not insomuch that it didn't work - on the contrary, he had not so much as glimpsed her in the halls - but because it left far too much opportunity for him to be well and truly alone.

Alone in his room with nothing to occupy his mind but the sound of the wind, and the smell of lavender and citrus kicked up by drafts that seeped in through the cracks in Skyhold’s ancient walls. The lingering scent of her bathing oils still bloomed from the jacket he had worn when he kissed her. The jacket he had shrugged off that night and slung over the back of a chair. Then somehow, forgotten to wash. Each time he reached for it, some compulsion would still his hand, and it would remain another day. The familiar scent greeted him each time he returned to his quarters - a little weaker with every passing night. Somehow he had hoped the passion he'd felt would slip away along with it. Of course, it had not. The fainter the scent had become the more of it he craved. And in spite of what he'd said to her, his sleep had been just as troubled since their parting. Though in the wake of their embrace, and with the smell of her lingering in the air as he slept, it was not Despair that stalked him...

And his weakness to it left him all the more frustrated.

With himself. With her. With everything.

If he could simply distance himself from her long enough, he thought, he would be able to strengthen his resolve. The Redcliffe mission was as good an opportunity as any: a week without her presence would vastly improve things. However, it seemed she was intent on making it difficult. A confrontation was inevitable, he knew, but at the very least, he hoped to ease some of her confusion by allowing the chilliness to creep back into their interactions first. To ensure she did not think he wanted to resume their romantic relationship. Urge her to believe the kiss had been a mistake - a momentary lapse in judgment - and allow her to gather her anger rather than cultivate hope. With enough space between them, he could better reinforce the boundary of their break-up.

Something he clearly needed to do better after failing so monstrously now three nights earlier.

He had intentionally delayed penning a reply to the missive until earlier that evening. Josephine usually arranged for a party to be packed and prepared to leave shortly after dawn on the first day of travel, and he had hoped that in receiving such a late response the ambassador would be forced to make a quick replacement before Ellana could be notified and had opportunity to argue against it. If all went well, she would not even notice until she arrived at the gates, and by then it would be too late to do anything about it. What followed would be the week of solitude he sorely needed.

It was underhanded, surely, but effective.

Clearly, it did not work out quite the way he had expected, he mused, as the Inquisitor loomed over his desk. Furious, silent, and clearly expecting an explanation from him that he had no want to
An explanation that she was not about to leave until she received.

Once again, they were at an impasse.

He sighed, but did not look at her. "There is no need for me to accompany you on this mission. It is a simple diplomatic meet, is it not? We have made the trip many times before and you are familiar with the road. The way is sparsely populated and the terrain relatively smooth. Harding's scouts would have sent note of any changes. I have projects that need my attention here in Skyhold. If you have need of a mage's skills, I would suggest asking Dorian."

"I didn't ask Dorian," Ellana replied through clenched teeth. "I asked you."

He risked meeting her eyes briefly, and could see the anger flashing there. The defiance. She stood opposite him in front of the desk, leaning back with arms folded. All poise and confidence with the stubborn streak of a mule. She was not about to back down, and he was loathe to start an argument with her when the threat of a headache was pooling at the base of his skull. Tension sat uncomfortably in every part of his body. He answered curtly, "You should not have."

Her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

Solas closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. Inwardly, he chided himself for the bite he had allowed to seep into his tone. Calm yourself. He tried again, making a concentrated effort to gentle his words. It did not work. "I would not be a good choice. My work is necessary and you would be pulling me from my studies. On any other occasion I would trust you to realize this."

An eyebrow raised. "But not now?" There was an edge to her voice that was dangerously close to mocking. As though she knew precisely the implication he was laying beneath his careful words and was using the attempt at a power play against him before he had even tipped his hand. It was maddening.

"Clearly."

She seemed almost amused by his reply, her lips twisting into something halfway between a smile and a sneer. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "You would do well to remember that as Inquisitor I have considerable say in how best to utilize your skills. If my suggestion wounds you so, I could just as easily make it an order." One might use this tone with a petulant child. It was not a way he had been spoken to in an age. Something about it raised his hackles, and he felt his pulse spike along with the pain of his sudden headache.

He dipped his quill into a pot of ink and scratched at his notes, the noise unmistakably harsh against the parchment. "One I would refuse."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he knew they were a mistake. He knew it in the second before her expression darkened and she rounded on him. He was rising to her baiting rather than remaining distant, and for whatever reason her attempts to needle him were working. When he heard the telltale sharp breath that usually predicted a truly epic flare of her temper, he let his eyes slip closed and leaned heavily into his palm.

She did not disappoint.

"Really?" she yelled. "Tell me, why are you even here, then? If you do not trust my judgment, or my authority, and you no longer hold enough respect for me to follow even the most simple of orders is there any purpose for your presence at all? Is this just personal enrichment for you? Are
The feathered quill stilled in his hand. His eyes were fixed on his work. "My respect and loyalty for the Inquisition has not wavered since I first arrived," Solas answered carefully. "Corypheus' forces threaten us all. It is the best interest of the Inquisition that I remain here for the time being and continue to serve. I have knowledge and experience that can assist you, and your organization, in your mission."

"Unless of course I require your actual, physical presence," she spat. "Then clearly your interests serve only yourself."

At last, he met her gaze. His fingers pressed hard into his temple. "I do not believe you have chosen the members of this party with the needs of this mission in mind. You are allowing your personal feelings to colour your perception. It is unbecoming of a leader."

She laughed bitterly, the sound trailing into a mocking hum. "And you would know better? Thank goodness I have you here to temper my emotions. Whatever would I do without you?"

"Clearly not your job!" The words snapped out before he could stop them. When he heard the echo of his raised voice, he recognized that his control of his anger might have begun to slip. But between his pounding heart, pounding headache, and the condescension that dripped from her every word he found himself struggling to reign in his temper.

*Do not engage with her. Stop this at once. You are being childish and—*

"Truly, what motivated you to request my attendance when you know perfectly well I have been absorbed in my work? Ask yourself: is there no part of you that has a personal investment?" Suddenly he was standing, palms pressed flat upon his desk and shoulders rolled forward, though he could not recall in what moment that had happened.

The challenge in his pose was matched immediately; she leaned against the other side of his desk, baring her teeth, and in spite of being barely more than inches from his face, the volume of their argument continued to rise. While she was considerably smaller and lither than he was, she was no less intimidating, particularly while angry – and she made good use of that now. "We're not expecting to encounter much resistance, if any at all. Your bottomless sense of self-importance non-withstanding, I hardly need use of Vivienne or Dorian's 'flare' on such a trip," she countered, throwing a hand into the air in emphasis. "Did it not occur to you that I may favour your skills as a mage because of your adept use of healing and barrier magic?"

He bristled. "Not when your judgement is so obviously clouded. You’ve been little more than self-destructive and argumentative as of late."

"And you would know this how? Between your brooding and invented work you've barely said a word to me." The jab was quick and biting - well rehearsed.

And it struck far surer than it should have.

Something inside him snapped. "You are being childish," he said – yelled - his hands balled into tight fists against the table. It was outrageous how far under his skin he had allowed her to get; he refused to give her the pleasure of knowing just how furious she had made him.

Rage darkened her eyes. "Am I, hahren? Fenedhis lasa!"

With a patronizing huff, he quipped, "How sporting." Adding a pointed, "Da'len" before he could stop himself. Drawing up to his full height, he folded his arms and leveled her with a deep scowl.
Her lip curled. "Dirtha'o'masa, Solas. Regardless of your personal opinion of me I remain the Inquisitor and when you are given an assignment by your betters you are expected to take it."

He tipped his head in a feigned bow, though his eyes remained locked on hers. "Ir abelas, Inquisitor, I shall try to endure the hardship of serving an organization of da'sildearal esha'lin."

Ellana recoiled as if struck, her arms dropping loosely to her sides. A mix of shock, horror, and fury descended over her features. In the brief silence that followed, he realized the situation might have spiraled a little out of control.

"Nuva Elgar'nan or'avise nuis ma!" She all but screamed it.

The muscle in his jaw twitched again as he struggled not to respond to kind. For a moment, it was quiet: the two of them staring daggers, locked in mutual fury with hearts racing and breath ragged.

*Calm yourself, you are making this worse.*

Solas closed his eyes; sucked a deep, shuddering breath in through his nose, and exhaled. *Slowly.* In spite of his efforts, it came out a hiss. He flexed his fingers, realizing for the first time that he had held his fists so tight there were crescent-shaped wounds in his palms.

The barest attempt of an apology began through his clenched teeth, but it got no further than a curt, "My-" before he was interrupted.

"Diana a'av'in. Diana a'av'in! Honestly Solas, the depth of your arrogance is matched only by your maddening need to continue toying with me!"

The last of her words were shouted loud enough to ring throughout the rotunda. Loud enough to echo up into the rookery. Leiliana's crows cried out at the disturbance, fleeing from their perches. Those that were not caged either escaped through the windows or flew in helpless circles, trying to find somewhere calmer to settle. In the wake of the cacophony, Solas became aware of the oppressive silence that had fallen over the building. Curious and disapproving faces were peering at them over the railings, drawn away from their conversations and their duties by the escalation of the argument below. His eyes scanned the balconies above him, searching, stopping as they met with Dorian's. The Tevinter shot him an icy glare before disappearing back into the library. A few others followed suit.

His ears burned with embarrassment, and when he met Ellana’s gaze, he was surprised to see she did not share the sentiment. Though, perhaps he shouldn’t have been – her fury with him seemed to overpower all rational thought. Solas sighed deeply, and hung his head. He brought a hand up and pushed his palm against the bridge of his nose. The headache was pounding now.

Quietly, and with a conscious effort to measure his anger, he said, "I do not believe this is the most appropriate place for this discussion."

Ellana scoffed but, thankfully, conceded his point. "Come, then," she spat.

Spinning on her heel, she stalked out of the room. She did not bother to linger long enough to hear if he had even answered her.
They strode through the great hall in tense silence, Ellana leading and Solas one step behind her. The pair passed by Varric without as much as a glance in his direction. Though in fairness, Varric pretended not to notice them. After the scene they had made, it was only polite.

The dwarf sat at a table near the door to the rotunda, his chair pushed back on two legs so he could rest his crossed ankles on the its surface. He hid his face behind a book, but his eyes followed the elves as they stalked across the room and disappeared into the Inquisitor’s tower. The few lingering staff that still populated the main hall at this time of night all but leapt out of their way as they passed, skittering off into corners with heads down and backs turned, trying to appear as though they had not just been eavesdropping. However, the fact that their fevered whispers resumed the second the door closed behind the quarreling pair rather betrayed that. Gossip was inevitable.

Especially after that.

He had never seen - well, heard - either of them so angry. Let alone with each other. An increasingly large part of him worried that they would not be able to have an amicable working relationship ever again. As it stood, the strain of their constant bickering was beginning to wear at the rest of the Inquisition. Though no one would dare say so. At least, not yet anyway. Whenever they started in on each other everyone would politely look in the other direction, wait for the worst to pass and pray it would all be over soon. Unfortunately, at this rate, that might never come to pass. It had been over a month since whatever happened, happened, and they only seemed to be getting worse. Solas was never one to crack under pressure, and so hearing him dissolve into cheap shots and angry Elvish was a bit unsettling. It spoke to the fact that he was too close to this to maintain his usual mask of cold reserve. It made Varric think that underneath all the angry bite and plays at apathy he was truly hurting. If so, it was made all the worse by the fact that he would never allow himself to be consoled by anyone. Close friend or no.

They say the depth of the love that developed in a relationship governs the hate that follows the breakup. Though as far as he knew they had not ever progressed into any sort of physical intimacy past a few stolen moments. So all this fury was coming from... where, exactly? Unresolved sexual tension? Could be, he thought. If that were the case, perhaps a few rounds of angry hate fucking would clear the air. Somehow, he doubted it would come to that - neither seemed the type.

Too bad, he thought with a bitter laugh, might actually help them get over it.

In truth, no one was entirely sure what had happened between them at all. Either before, or after. Neither were particularly forthcoming about... well, anything. Maybe it was an elf thing. Though, Daisy had never been like that. Fenris, yes. Daisy no. Maybe just a ‘them’ thing, then.

Their painfully obvious mutual attraction had progressed at a near glacial pace, giving way to sly flirtation that eventually settled on some sort of illicit almost-affair over the course of an entire year, only to abruptly break off into whatever the void this was. Whatever happened must have been intense, and sudden, and clearly not mutual given the palpable tension between them. Varric imagined it was likely – maybe even definitely – Solas’ doing. If for no other reason than for the first week after whatever went down he slinked about Skyhold like a wounded animal licking at their wounds. The idea was not exactly surprising. Somehow, he seemed like the type to have commitment issues. The weird, wandering, lonely apostate bit that he had going on probably made him used to being alone for a long time.

Perhaps it was a "too much too soon" sort of thing. Dalish were big on rushing things, right? Overly physical, flirtatious, close to everyone. Clan mentality. Maybe it was culture shock. Maybe she rushed into him and that's what did it. Maybe he freaked out when it started to get real.
Regardless, it was **big** - big enough for them to barely be able to tolerate each other's presence even a month down the line. This fight was the biggest he had seen, but at least they had moved it somewhere more private once it got personal.

And **mean**.

He'd never seen them mean.

A sudden, sharp sense of anxiety went through him at that: they wouldn't *hurt* each other, right? *Of course not*, he decided firmly. They weren't like that. Never like that. They always protected each other in battle, even in the midst of… this. They couldn't possibly strike out in anger.

Maybe this could be a good thing, then. Finally coming to – *verbal* – blows and fighting out the other side of this. Andraste knows they needed to sort it out, whatever "it" is. If not for their sake, then for the rest of the Inquisition, because it was becoming an issue for everyone. At this point, all Varric really wanted was for everything to go back to normal – how it used to be. He missed normal. Normal was good. It had been a long damn time since had even seen the two elves *smile* at each other, and as well as things had been going he was beginning to wonder if they ever would again.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr, for updates, DA:I stuff and prompts:
http://www.tumblr.com/bdafic

**TRANSLATIONS:**

hahren = Elder, older person / generally used in honor but in this case it's patronizing
Fenedhis lasa = A common curse, probably "go suck a wolf's dick" or an equivalent of "Go fuck yourself"
Da'len = Child
dirtha'o'masa = You're talking out of your ass
Ir abelas = I'm sorry
da'sildearal esha'lin = Small-minded children
Nuva Elgar'nan or'avise nuis ma = May the fires of Elgar'nan burn you. I made this one up but I figured it's a pretty good curse.
Diana a'av'in = Shut your mouth/Shut up
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

This took forever. Turns out I cannot write a love scene that doesn't rapidly switch POVs. I tried so hard to fix it, but eventually just gave up - there was too much I wanted to communicate from both of those involved. It flows, at least? Maybe? Hopefully? I literally had to just rip the band-aid off and post this so I stop trying to edit it to pieces.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The echoing slam of the heavy wooden door to Ellana’s quarters marked the continuation of their argument. The sound reverberating through the empty room like a thunderclap. Solas lingered a moment at the bottom of the stairwell to lock and ward the entrance. The act was borne more out of habit than fear of any actual threat – he had always taken protective measures when alone with The Inquisitor, regardless of the situation. The spell had been performed enough times in enough places that it had become second nature; and at this point neither of them took notice of it, nor would they have drawn any implication from the act if they had.

By the time he finished and began climbing the stairs, she was already half way to the desk on the opposite side of her room.

“So, have you had your fill of undermining my authority?” she demanded, her bare feet slapping against the exposed flagstones between the plush Nevarran rugs. She did not mean to stomp, not truly, but anger held her body rigid with tension and she had long lost the ability to move with any of the grace he had once complimented.

Solas paused when he reached the landing, his eyes narrowing. “I was not--!” he began, but bit his tongue before he could finish the retort. There was no point in continuing this. Not when they now had the privacy to discuss what was truly fueling their anger with each other. With a heavy sigh, he rather needlessly informed, “This is not about the missive.”

Ellana reached the desk and turned, leaning back until her hips rested against it. She folded her arms. “Oh, we’re no longer keeping up the charade, are we? Wonderful.” The words were positively dripping with sarcasm; but while her tongue was still sharp, the worst of her temper had eased somewhat in the time it had taken them to reach her room.

Nevertheless, she continued to needle him.

Solas took a breath to steel himself. “I know you are angry,” he said coolly. Ellana fixed him with a hard glare, as if in emphasis of this point. Ignoring her, he continued, “You have every right to be after my actions. I should not have kissed you.”

She scoffed, and reached again for the familiar comfort of dark humour to mask the sting his regret gave her. “I’m just one mistake after another to you, aren’t I?” There was a slight crack in her voice as she bit out the words, and she quickly cast her gaze aside, hoping he had not heard it.
Thankfully, it seemed he did not.

“That is—you—!” he blustered, angry, taking a step toward her. Then he stopped, turned, shifted his weight from one foot to the other and finally settled on pinching the bridge of his nose with a thumb and forefinger. Another deep sigh pushed through his nose, and he closed his eyes—taking a moment simply to breathe. He looked exhausted when he opened them again, and his voice reflected the same. “My actions were inappropriate, and the mistake was mine—not yours. It was a lapse in judgment. It will not happen again.” When she gave no response but to deepen her scowl, he added, “And this… behavior is ridiculous. You do not need to corner me on some mindless escort mission.”

“And you don’t need to avoid me,” she snapped back. “Yet you’ve been doing it for days. Weeks, really.”

“I have not been avoiding you,” he lied.

She laughed bitterly. “Right. Of course. My mistake!” She shook her head and huffed, dropping her eyes to the floor again. In the tense silence that followed, somehow her gaze found the ornate Orlesian couch pushed against the wall near to where Solas stood. The scene looked, for some reason she could not name, rather strange to her. He stood with his body held so stiff and tense, barely a step out of the stairwell, right next to the plush elegance of her ridiculous furniture and pointedly not looking at it.

Then all at once, it came to her, and she was crushed under the heavy weight of memory. The last time he had been in her room it was on that couch. When they were still lovers. They had sat curled together upon it, reading in a comfortable silence until late into the evening. Her head rest against his shoulder, and he had wrapped an arm around her waist. It felt wonderful. Safe. Intimate. The slow, soft beat of his heart beneath her ear had been so soothing that she very nearly fell asleep on him. At one point, he had reached over and plucked the book from her hands, marking the page with a ribbon and placing it on the cushion beside her. In a rare moment of spontaneity, he then caught her chin, and kissed her. Those occasions where he initiated affection with her were so uncommon, so precious and fleeting, that she deeply cherished them. She had studied every breath, every soft, lingering touch before filing them away deep in her memory—to relive in the sanctity of fantasies and dreams.

They had kissed, long and slow, with his hands cradling her face and fingers delving deep into the loose tangle of her hair. The heat between them built but never quite reached a burn that would prompt either to push for more. He was always so careful to ensure he pulled away before that happened, though she was never certain as to why. Always so slow. Every movement measured and deliberate. When they finally parted, breathless and with swollen lips, he had said he loved her, and then gave another, smaller kiss to the corner her mouth before retiring to his room.

She had no way of knowing it would be the last time.

Presently, her throat clenched—and with great effort, she tore her gaze away.

Behind her, the curtains fluttered, and the room suddenly chilled as a breeze blew in through the open balcony door. She shivered, hugging herself. Without hesitation, Solas turned to the fireplace and raised a hand. A bright ball of magic bloomed from his fingertips, and with a gesture, he let it fly. It caught the logs stacked in the hearth, and they erupted in billowing flame a second later. With another subtle flick, he stoked the fire and drew a wave of heat into the room, where it then wrapped around Ellana’s shoulders and surrounded her in a shroud of comfortable warmth.
The whole act was performed rather absently. Old habits borne of long nights when she would whisper endearments against his skin.

It turned her stomach.

“Stop that.” Ellana’s voice was quiet and small, and the sudden change in her demeanor gave Solas a start.

He frowned. “Stop what?”

“That,” she answered, nodding to the fireplace. “Doing those things. For me. Stop pretending that you still care.”

Against his better judgment he replied, “I’m not pretending, Ellana.” It was sincere, but it seemed cruel to say in a moment when distance was so sorely needed. And immediately, he regretted it.

“What is this?” Her voice was rising again. The familiarity of his presence, the pain in the chasm of space between them and the little intimacies in habits he had yet to break felt like needles under her skin. “What are you doing? What in the void happened in the library when—?”

“The library was a mistake.” He cut her off before she could finish the question. “I should not have given into my desires.”

That gave her pause.

She blinked. “Given into your desires?” Her head tilted as she repeated his answer, eyes narrowing.

Solas stiffened. He felt his pulse spike. It was a truth he had not intended to let slip. “A poor choice of words.”

There was another pause as she considered his response, turning the words over in her head. “No,” she said slowly. Carefully. “I think it was an apt one.” She was watching him now, eyes darting between his. Looking for a weakness. He shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny.

It felt like an age had passed before she spoke again.

“I don’t understand you,” she whispered, dropping her eyes to the floor. And then, louder, “If you truly care, you have a very strange way of showing it. You have treated me with such coldness since Crestwood, and yet it is clear you still harbour... something. Whatever that is, I have no idea. You left me, you avoid me, you do everything in your power to keep me at arm’s length – and then you go and claim you still love me before your terrible mistake.” She made the words sound like daggers, and her eyes flashed with anger as she spoke them, though she would not look at him. Not yet. “You attempt to wound me at every turn.”

“It was never my intent to wound you,” he countered quickly. Perhaps too quickly. He found he had taken a step or two in her direction in his urgency to correct her. Had even reached out to touch her. With far too much effort, he stilled, and tucked his hands safely behind his back, clasping them in a loose fist.

Her eyes were so full of exhaustion and pain when they met his own that it made his heart clench. “Then what was your intent?” she asked, as though the question were so easy to answer. “What do you want, Solas?”

“What I want is of no consequence!” he snapped. Anger was creeping back into his voice, now.
He struggled not to clench his hands again. “Nor should it be. We are at war! We are preparing for a confrontation that may very well end in both of our deaths. What is needed is for us to be able to maintain a working relationship without becoming romantically entangled. You have your duties to this organization, as do I, and we should focus on the matters at hand.” It wasn’t quite the truth, and wasn’t quite a lie – but it would do well enough for the moment when his pounding heart and the tempestuous swirl of emotions in his chest were starting to get the better of him. A distant part of his mind warned that he needed to find a way to calm himself before she had him well and truly cornered. He was slipping.

“And where was this logic when you were flirting with me back in Haven?” she demanded. A hand fervently gestured toward the open door. “Or when you stood on my balcony and told me you had fallen in love with me? Mere months ago! Something happened! Some reminder, some incident – maybe even something I did. Nevertheless, something changed for you, Solas. I am not a fool!”

Too late.

“I—” He hesitated, and then fell silent – lost for words. She had him unexpectedly pinned; somewhere along the line, he had lost control of the conversation and it had become too honest. Too real. He had become ensnared by the lies too close to the truth, let slip by his traitorous tongue and the pierce of her wicked intellect. Now he was left scrambling for the remnants of his practiced façade as he stood before her, unmasked, nervously casting his eyes side to side as if hoping to find a physical way out of the corner she had him backed into.

Had she always been able to see through him so easily?

She took note of his discomfort immediately, of course, and was quick to take advantage of the opening it provided. “Is there someone else? Are you already bonded?”

His eyes snapped to hers and he frowned deeply. The questions were posed with obvious sarcasm – bait for a trap – but he still felt the need to answer.

“Of course not!”

“Then what is it?”

A wholly unexpected feeling of vulnerability gripped him as she stared him down, and it made his chest grow tight. Of course, he knew what had changed: he had fallen too hard, and too deep. He had come to realize that what he felt could never be just a dalliance, an indulgence or brief affair. She was beautiful, inquisitive, and far too real. Her existence in this life and her infernal nearness threatened everything he had worked toward. He loved her more than he had ever loved anything, and the knowledge that she could rend apart millennia worth of plans with little more than the promise of a kiss was as terrifying as it was exhilarating – and if there were any chance of his success, it would only come if he pushed her away.

He would not dare tell her that.

He would not dare tell her that what changed was nothing. It was only that he had come to understand it fully, himself – and then ran from it.

So instead, he grasped at whatever convenient excuse and half-truth he could manage to dredge from his racing thoughts.

“A romantic relationship with one’s leader is inappropriate? I made a selfish mistake? You deserve better? – Take your pick!” He was pacing now, tight steps back and forth across the rug in front of the blazing fire. It felt too hot.
“You have never seen me as your leader,” she seethed, taking a step away from the table and toward him.

The conviction with which she said it gripped his chest like cold fingers around his heart – she thought he held no respect for her. How could she, given his treatment of her as of late? With the context missing, his clumsy attempts to keep her at arm’s length appeared to her as callous disrespect. Of the organization, of her position, and of her. The behavior of a man who had enjoyed her for convenience, and missed little of her presence now that she was gone.

The hard line of his shoulders sagged, and his expression softened. “You know that is not true,” he said quietly, though he did not quite believe the words himself.

A scoff. “Do I?” Then, suddenly, she gave herself a shake and seemed to regard him with renewed interest. The full implication of his words only now sinking in. “Wait, what do you mean I ‘deserve better’?” She almost laughed, but hid the sound in a startled cough. When he met her gaze, he found her expression was strangely unreadable, as though she had not yet settled on what to feel at his admission.

Of course, she would latch onto the one whole truth amidst his careful lies.

“I am a Dalish elf who was forced into a position of power by little more than a series of terrible coincidences. I was barely literate before coming to the Inquisition. I have no family to speak of, no wealth, no titles or holdings other than what has been thrust upon me for the duration of this conflict!” Her eyes were wide with a mix of disbelief and confusion, and amidst her rambling, she had taken several steps toward him. She was close enough now that he caught a bloom of her scent: oils, sweat, and her natural musk. Too close. He took a step back from her as she yelled, “What would you believe I deserve?”

“Someone far better than I!” The words came tumbling out all at once before he could think to stop them.

Silence, then.

In the quiet room, all that could be heard was her startled, halting breaths. She was staring at him. He wanted to tear his gaze away, to turn and leave, but he found himself rooted to the floor. Pinned by her eyes – desperate and pained – as they searched his own. Her brows knit in weary confusion and she gave a small, subtle shake of her head.

“Who are you?”

The question came as such a shock that he could not quite catch the choked sound that slipped through his parted lips in response. It was all he could do not to gape at her. It took conscious effort to finally close his mouth, tighten his jaw, and remain steadfastly silent beneath her penetrating gaze.

“What have you done? Where do you even come from?”

She threw the questions out one after another, each more bewildering than the last, not truly expecting a reply and yet intent that he know the course her thoughts had taken.

She continued, “I know so little of you – you’ve offered nothing of your origins outside your experience as a wandering, homeless apostate – though it is abundantly clear you are so much more than simply that. The breadth of your wisdom and experience speak of a life that has
obviously given you the privilege of an education and status I could never hope to achieve. Even as The Inquisitor! Fenedhîs, you even walk like a blighted nobleman, Solas! You have guarded this aspect of yourself as though it were a dark secret – one I have been content to let you keep - yet you are convinced you are unworthy of my affections? Is that what this has truly been about? Some guilty sense of self-loathing tangled up in that darkness you carry?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but found he could not find his voice. Nor any words to say, if he had. Another short, choked sound emerged from his parched throat, but nothing more. His pulse was pounding in his ears and the room felt at once too small and too large.

Then, suddenly, she was crossing the floor. Long and confident steps quickly closing the distance between them. Her eyes were locked on his and her face held that same expression as before – the one he could not quite read. That could not quite settle on something to feel. When she reached a point so close that she could touch him, if she desired, he took another step back. Raising both hands toward her in defense. Immediately, she stilled – and frowned at him. Confused by his submission. He had no idea if the intention of her approach was to hit him or to kiss him, but either way he could not let her get that close. She was already too close. Too much. Too real. His quiet reserve was breaking apart. Head swimming and knees weak, crushed under the little truths she had pulled out of him like loose threads.

He was unraveling.

She was unbearably near, now. Near enough to see the unshed tears in her eyes, and the pink that gathered on the apples of her cheeks. A lock of hair had fallen from her thick braid and come to rest against her temple. It lifted slightly when another breeze dipped into the room, curling against her brow. His fingers twitched at his side. The urge to touch her was becoming overwhelming, and he was not sure how much longer he could resist it.

Weak, selfish, old fool.

In the silence, she was still watching him, searching him, but something in her expression had softened now. Again, she gave a small shake of her head, and whispered, “You are a liar, and a coward.” She spoke without malice. The words not meant to pay him insult, spoken instead with deep conviction.

It was a truth they both needed to hear spoken aloud.

A single brow curled inward and the corner of her mouth twitched. The ghost of a sad smile forming on her lips. When she spoke again, her voice lilted with the quiet awe of someone who had uncovered the secret of a lost and forgotten treasure. Perhaps she had.

“You are pushing me away because you are afraid.”

Her name was a futile protest, a prayer upon his lips. “Ellana—” but she cut him off.

“You are afraid,” she repeated. The sound of her voice snagged a rough edge of his heart, and it made his breath hitch. There was a tenderness there he did not deserve. He could not understand how, after all he had done, she could still regard him with such care and gentleness. Her love was a gift he dared not accept.

Slowly, she took a final step forward, closing the distance between them entirely. Another inch and her body would be upon him. Tentatively, she lifted a hand and let it rest cupped against his cheek. A feather light touch so soft and so warm that his eyes fluttered closed at the press of it. He should run, he knew, but the contact – however chaste – felt impossibly warm on his skin. He swallowed
hard, and leaned into her palm. Her fingertips curled against his jaw. The next breath he took filled his lungs with her scent, and the ghost of every delicate touch her lips had ever given him glanced across his skin. His heart pounded in his chest.

“Terrified.”

Time seemed to move slowly.

There was the barest hint of movement as her palm slid against his jaw. The soft touch of her fingertips on his bicep, tracing up toward his shoulder. A quiet gasp as she took in a nervous breath, and held it. The sensation of warmth as she pressed her chest against his own. His hands finding her hips, moving against his whims as though guided by reflex.

*If you kiss her now, said a distant voice, you will not part until morning.*

But he was *lost.*

Their lips met, and the world melted away.

It was soft and slow at first. Tentative. Cautious. She tasted of honeyed tea, and he drank deeply from her. Eager for all she had to give. She kissed him as though his mouth were the only thing that existed in the world. As though it gave her life. The devotion and the eagerness in her embrace spurred something deep within him. A warmth that blossomed in his chest and spread into his arms, his neck, and low in his stomach, chasing away the gnawing darkness there. He pulled her into it – arms wrapping around to envelop her – wanting to drown her in that chasm of heat and feel it *grow.* The press of her body fed it like oil on a dying fire, and when her arms looped around his neck to hold him nearer still, his next breath was a little more than a quiet shudder against her mouth.

He ran his tongue along the seam of her mouth and she opened for him readily. Then sucked in a sudden, harsh, little hitch of a breath each time his teeth grazed her lips. The sound of her desperation made his knees feel weak. For all his schooled control, she had managed to tear him asunder with little more than aching words and he was *helpless* in her embrace. Needy and wanting. Her fingertips may as well have left wounds where they grazed. He was soft and supple beneath her touch, and with every squeeze of her hands and press of her mouth, she sculpted his longing and loneliness into something that *fit* with her. Something that clicked into place, and sparked. Each soft, lingering kiss was an answer to prayers too desperate to speak aloud. Every heated breath against his skin, every soft sigh, every flick of her tongue against his stoked a flame so old and so deep that he had forgotten what it felt like to *burn.*

Now, he was alive with fire.

His hands searched her body, running along the curve of her waist and coming to rest near her breasts. In turn, she lifted her arms, using the pose to rake her nails over the back of his head and neck while offering him the opportunity to explore her further. The invitation did not escape his notice, but he was struggling to pace himself. Instead, he twisted his fingers into her braid, hanging loose at the nape of her neck, and gently worked it free while his tongue swept her mouth. He tried to focus on unraveling her hair, the feel of the silken tresses between his fingers to slow his wanton touch… But then she *groaned* and the sound cracked just a little at the end, and it sent his blood pumping. Lit by the same untamed desire that had propelled him in the library.

Except now, there were no passing servants. No sudden, slamming doors. No risk of interruption. There was only her, alone, here in his arms, with her soft sounds and needy fingers pulling at his clothes – and he could do nothing but give himself over to passion.
With a choked moan, his hands raked over her sides and firmly palmed both her breasts. She 
writhed. Arching her back to push herself into his touch, inadvertently breaking their kiss with a 
sharp gasp against his mouth. His lips were on her jaw, then: kissing, nipping at her skin, and 
trying to gather enough focus to move at least one hand away from her breasts long enough to 
fumble with the buttons on her jacket. But the hushed, urgent sighs she made as his tongue laved 
along the column of her throat only made it all the more difficult. His hands kneaded generous 
flesh, nails digging into her clothes and for the briefest moment he found himself vaguely grateful 
for the extra layers so that his bruising grasp would not hurt her. It was becoming a challenge to 
hold back the part of himself that wanted to throw her against the wall and make love to her so hard 
and so fast that they would both be left addled and screaming by the end.

But he could not. He would not let mindless lust be what drove his hands when first they laid 
together.

He loved her.

_He loved her._

And he needed her to feel that love in his touch this night.

He caught her mouth again, kissing deep and long, and with measured care slid a hand down to her 
hip. A small, guiding, push – and she understood. Without breaking their kiss, they stumbled 
together across the room until the back of Ellana’s legs hit the edge of her bed. The sudden impact 
captured her by surprise and she faltered, her eyes snapping open as she fell backward onto the 
mattress, taking Solas down with her. He caught himself with a palm braced next to her head and 
his knee against her waist. One hand still grasped her hip.

Time stopped.

Their gaze locked – eyes dark and heavy-lidded – faces held a breath apart. And for a long 
moment, nothing happened.

Not at first.

They lay with legs entwined upon the bed, staring at each other and panting from their shared 
exertion and excitement. Frozen in the space between thought and action. If there were ever a 
chance to stop – to regret – this was it. They both knew it. The air around them was charged with a 
nervous energy. The silence was overwhelming; the only sounds in the room their heavy breaths 
and pounding hearts as they searched each other. For a reason. For reassurance. For _something._

A wave of anxiety surged in Ellana’s chest and she swallowed hard, her grip on Solas’ shoulders 
already tightening in the fear that he would pull away. He would leave her, again, even after all 
that had happened.

Then, the corner of his mouth lifted. Just a little. The barest hint of a smile, though nervous and a 
touch shy. And then his thumb rubbed a circle against her hip. A small touch, gentle and assuring.

_I am here. I want this._

A soft huff of relieved laughter tumbled from her lips as she let her arms encircle his neck again, 
bringing up a leg astride his hip. She angled her chin up to kiss him again, but he pulled back just 
slightly. For a moment, she worried, brows knit and heart clenching, but he soothed her with 
another small smile. Before they continued, he needed… _something._ So she let the tension fall 
from her shoulders, and watched. Nervous with anticipation.
Gently curled fingers began to trace a path up her body – along her side, over a breast and across her neck – until he finally reached her cheek. He cupped it gently in his palm, running a thumb over her bottom lip. His eyes followed the movement, and she watched him – his face so full of quiet reverence that she found herself left breathless. This was an honesty and vulnerability she was not familiar with. He had shed his mask for tonight, for now, and was willingly allowing her to see what lay beneath.

When his gaze found her own again, she shivered under the intensity of it.

With eyes heavy-lidded, he whispered, “Ar lath ma, Ellana,” and then his lips caught hers in a fierce, bruising kiss.

And with it, a dam broke.

She ran her hands down his front and fumbled with the latch on his belt. Once undone, he shrugged his jacket off his shoulders and let it fall away behind him. The metal buckle making a soft *tink* as it hit the flagstone floor. He moved a thigh between her legs, pressing it against her center as his hands made a similar search for the fastenings of her clothes. But she was faster, and had managed to tear his tunic up and off his body before he'd even gotten her free from the arms of her own.

A calloused touch made rough by years of archery ran, wild, needy, across the exposed skin of his chest, and back. Raising gooseflesh wherever it impressed. His lips parted from her own by necessity only as he struggled to catch his breath between needy groans and deep shudders. They had barely begun and already she had him flushed and weak.

It had been too long. *Far* too long.

In a vain attempt at distraction, he tried to search his memories for the last time he had been touched in such a way, and unsurprisingly, he found he could not recall the instance. He craved it *desperately*; already rendered so fragile by his need that it was near to painful. It would be embarrassing, how readily he submit to her, if not for the look in her eye that told him just how much she was enjoying his easy response. So he held her gaze when she watched his body shake, biting her lip, as her nails raked across his back so hard she left red trails in their wake.

Her mouth went to his throat, pressing a gentle kiss upon his pulse and another beneath his earlobe. Then she bit down on his neck just below his jaw in the same instant her nail flicked against a hardened nipple, and the sensation sent a jolt of arousal through him like a strike of lightning. The sudden, shocked, sound he made echoed off the walls. In response, her thighs tightened around his leg, and she ground herself against his thigh. When she repeated the motion – and the bite – he clenched his jaw tightly. Not quite catching the moan that pushed through his nose. He was determined to regain some semblance of control even as his head swam. It took every ounce of will he had to shake himself free from the trappings of his own arousal, and return his attention where it belonged.

A frustrated growl slipped from his lips as he took her wrists in hand and pinned them to the mattress above her head. Beneath the press of his next kiss, she groaned – *loud*– then smiled as he gave another, softer, kiss to the corner of her mouth. Inwardly, he made a note to remember that preference… to file it away for another time, and another night.

Releasing her wrists, he trailed his fingers down her arms and over her breasts, pausing there to knead them again. He found he could not help himself when she arced so beautifully into his touch. Taking the hint, she wriggled free of her coat, pulling it out from beneath her and throwing it somewhere behind them. He nudged her jaw to one side with his nose, kissing along her neck, and then nipping at her skin to elicit more of the pleasured gasps and moans he sought. The sounds
made his body flush with desire; the ache for more of her prickling under his skin. Already he was buzzing, drunk on lust. When she ground against his thigh he found himself struggling not to rut against her in return; his erection straining painfully against his breeches and desperate for friction.

As if she’d read his thoughts then, her hand slithered between their bodies, moving with clear intent. He made to catch her wrist, but was not quite fast enough. Clever fingers curled around his clothed length, her palm rubbing just a little, deftly exploring what she could feel of the shape of him through the fabric.

He bit his lip.

In an instant, he forgot about their argument, about the turmoil, about the weeks of enforced distance and even the reasons why he pushed her away to begin with. All that remained was her heat, her scent, her touch, the quiet sounds of her pleasure in his ears, and the promise of a union he had only ever dared imagine in his most depraved fantasies – when tension and desire became so unbearable as to drive him to seek guilty release in the palm of his hand.

Her lips were at his ear, her voice low and husky as she whispered to him. “How long?” She ran a finger along the length of his arousal, a firm press from base to tip. Smiling when she felt him twitch.

Truthfully, he could not remember. Whether the memories of past encounters were driven away by time, or by present need, he was not sure. He shook his head, “Too long,” he rasped, and kissed her soundly.

A growing need to feel her bared set his fingers twitching; and with her touch teasing along the seam of his breeches, he could not stand to wait any longer. Looping an arm beneath her back, he pulled them both upright in a quick, rough motion. Both hands gripped the hem of her tunic, and urged it over her head. The instant she was free of it his fingers were at the lacings of her breastband, fumbling and clumsy, near to ripping it from her body in his impatience. Soon it was added to the pile of discarded clothes on the floor. He wrapped his arms around her then – pressing his broad chest flush to hers – and with great care, he lowered her back down upon the bed.

On a whim, he captured her bottom lip between his teeth and pulled slightly. A sharp bite. She gasped – more pleasure than shock – and he left another, softer kiss in its place. A tease. Satisfied, he then braced a hand gently against her shoulder, and rose up on his elbow to gaze upon her.

She watched his face as his eyes roved her body, lying unashamed and eager beneath him. For a moment, all he could do was stare – entranced by the sight of her. A soft breath left his parted lips, and when he reverently whispered, “You are so beautiful,” she knew it was more than simply desire that fueled his words. And so in that moment, she believed him.

Solas willed himself to move slowly. Soft fingers brushed a light and teasing trail across her stomach, watching with pupils blown wide as her muscles fluttered and tensed. A hushed gasp caught in her throat as he ran the back of his knuckles along the curve of her breast. Then delicately drew his nails across the swell, circling, teasing a darkened nipple erect. She gave an approving groan, twisting her thighs around the leg he had firmly planted between her own. As he gently rolled and stroked the hardened nub between his fingers, her eyes fluttered, head falling to one side and arcing her body into his touch. Silently pleading for more.

He took her invitation with a grin, cupping her breast in his palm before descending and sucking the bud into his mouth. Her quiet, restrained groan became an unexpected yelp of pleasure. The feel of his hot tongue and sharp teeth on tender flesh drew sharp, whispered curses – then a long moan of his name. Writhing, helpless beneath him she was able to do little more than rake her nails
over his scalp, and pant. The sound of her keening cries made him bold, made him twitch, the grip
his other hand on her hip tightening until his fingertips dug into her skin.

He released her with a flick of his tongue and she was gasping; tense and quivering in anticipation
as he kissed a trail across her chest, pausing just long enough to exhale a puff of heated breath
before assaulting the other breast much the same as he had the first.

Her breasts, supple and modest, were extraordinarily sensitive – a state heightened phenomenally
by the excitement of finally having his hands on them. In moments, she was made a quivering,
mewling mess without even the sense left to be embarrassed by her state.

The deft circling of his tongue and the squeeze of his palm drove her to grind wantonly against his
thigh, the movement bringing with it the unintentional side effect of her leg repeatedly brushing
against his groin. It was driving him mad – every teasing rub stoking his arousal until his head was
swimming. He could not stop her even if he had wanted to, and creators he did not want her to. It
took only a few sweeps against him before the need to chase the sensation won out over his
attempts to preserve his modesty. At the next brush of her leg, he gave in. He used the firm grasp
of her hip to pull her body as close as she could get, and rocked, pushing his aching cock into the
junction of her groin. A long, deep moan tore from his throat. Even clothed, the friction was
exquisite.

In an instant, she had shifted her body beneath him to provide a better angle, and leaned into the
movement in a way that had him struggling not to bite down on the delicate nub still held between
his teeth. He was coming undone, and she was reveling in his agony.

It was at once too much, and not enough.

With a low growl, he traced a line up to her neck with his tongue, tasting her racing pulse. His lips
hovered over the shell of her ear a moment, letting her hear his ragged breath when they rut against
each other once more, before he whispered a fierce, “Off”, tugging hard at the lacings of her
breeches in emphasis.

She obliged without hesitation, fumbling with the cording and working with his hands until
together they had managed to tear both her pants and smalls off in one swift movement. He wasted
no time once they were gone; pushing himself up onto his hands and knees to give her room to shift
her body higher on the bed. Hunger flashed in his eyes as he watched her move, sinuous and slow
beneath him, enjoying the view the position awarded.

After months of quiet reserve and only the barest flickers of passion, witnessing the depths of his
desire was intoxicating. The more Ellana saw, the more she wanted to see him come completely
undone. See him come. To hear those little sounds he made when she touched him turn into
something long and loud. The thought alone was enough to send a wave of tension coiling in her
belly, and she twisted her legs together.

His eyes snapped to the movement, lips parting.

Oh.

With a sly smile, she began to exaggerate her movements as she pulled herself up the bed. A roll of
her shoulder, a turn of her hip, parting her legs just enough to give him a glimpse of what glistened
between her thighs. The seduction seemed to work, as he made a sound like a growl that sent her
pulse alight just before his mouth crashed into hers. The kiss was fierce, dizzying, and pulled her in
so deeply she did not notice his hand working down her body until his fingers reached the apex of
her thighs. He paused there, waiting, and if she were any weaker, she would have begged. It was
only by the thinnest thread of control that she hadn’t begun to already. Her legs parted wide and she tightened her grip on his shoulders.

*Please.*

So desperate was her need to be filled – to be *touched* – that when he finally stroked his thumb across her clit and dipped a finger inside her, she bit down on his lip hard enough to steal a sharp hiss. He stilled, surprised, and she broke their kiss. A blush bloomed on her cheeks.

"Sorry," she breathed, panting against his mouth.

He laughed softly. "Do not concern yourself," he said, his voice low and full of promise. "Aside –" Two fingers slowly plunged into her, and curled. The sound she made was *obscene*, embarrassing in its volume. He paused for a moment, giving her time to adjust to the fullness before he thrusting into her second time, pushing against the sensitive knot within her, then drawing his fingers back out slowly. Eliciting another long, loud moan. "—I did not mind".

The rhythm was slow at first – teasing, frustrating – but soon began to quicken. His touch moved in time to his tongue sweeping through her mouth. She could not help but grind against his palm, a whine punctuating each breath as her hips rose to meet the curl of his fingers. She lifted a leg to wrap around his waist, digging her heel into his backside, urging him deeper. *Harder.*

His thumb, circling her clit, made a strange flicking motion and she barely had time to notice the strange movement before her core filled with a deep, penetrating heat. The sensation drew a pleased cry from her – a spell, she realized. The effect was phenomenal, and unlike anything she had ever felt before. In her youth, she had laid with magic users in her clan, but it was never like this. That was warm hands on cold nights and little shocks from nervous fingers. This was a wonder. His touch was a perfect balance of warmth and rhythm, taking his cue from her hitched breath and quiet whines, guiding her body toward a peak that had her shuddering in anticipation. The more he moved, the heavier the sensation of magic became, and it did not take long for her to find herself close.

When her fevered panting was enough that she could no longer hold his kiss, he pulled away. She frowned, confused, but a glimpse of his darkened eyes and heavy breaths told her he wanted to see her pleasure. To witness what his touch could command. A deep, crimson flush had spread from his chest to ears, lips swollen and eyes heavy-lidded as he watched her. Evidence of the state of his arousal.

The strength of his summoning increased, and she bit her lip hard to keep from crying out.

His lips brushed against hers. "No," he urged. "I wish to hear you."

Then there was a great, surging sensation that rippled over her body like a heat wave. It filled her with a tightly coiled need. A deep longing. She gasped, and did not realize until a moment later that he had as well. As near as she was, she no longer had the ability to ponder why his breaths were coming in time with her own. Why it felt like the heat from his fingers moving inside her was spreading through her veins, sending long pulses into her arms and legs that seeped out through her hands where they grasped at his back. Why her heartbeat pounded in her ears and some distant part of her knew she was hearing his as well.

As she crested, he pressed his lips to her temple, and his eyes fluttered closed. And when she broke, she called out louder than she ever had in her life.

Hands clutchled and clawed, leaving red trails that she swore she could feel blooming on her own
skin. He held her suspended there, filling her with mana, drawing her climax out for as long as her body would allow. It was only once her thighs began to quake that the surging feeling began to ebb. The tingle of his spell melted away as his movements stilled. His eyes opened, and he met her gaze. She was gasping, chest tight and heaving from what was easily the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced.

"Felax," he murmured. "Odhea, vhenan." He kissed her softly as she struggled for breath. He withdrew his fingers and gently stroked her dark curls. A subtle cold blossomed there, a welcome calm.

Half-formed thoughts tumbled from her lips: her mind still far too hazy for anything to make sense. "What was…? How? Was that you?" She laughed. Both for the inanity of her questions and for how ridiculous she sounded trying to speak them aloud. Of course it was him.

A slow, satisfied smile spread over his lips. It looked almost smug. He stroked her cheek, and she felt the faintest glow of warmth pool over her skin. She sighed, leaning into it. A thumb swept over her lip.

“Connection,” he explained. Though his response left her with more questions than answers. He lifted her chin with his fingers, and leaned in for a kiss. As his tongue pushed between her swollen lips, his thumb moved to her chin, and circled – the same motion he had made over her center moments ago. A shock of mana sank into her skin and stung her mouth. Not unpleasant, but strangely electrifying. A quickening sensation. A pulse that pushed its way deeper inside her with every flick of his tongue against her own. Though her body felt heavy and sated from release, the energy that spread through his touch was lifting her higher again. Drawing tension in through her skin and stoking it like a fire. It did not seem possible to be drawn so quickly back to a place of quaking need by little more than the heat of his embrace and the mana in her skin. Yet it built. The more he touched her with the strange magic, the tighter her body wound, until she was taut like a bow drawn back and ready to fire.

When he pulled away, a snap of electricity passed between them that left her lips tingling. His eyes met hers and he tilted his head. Awaiting a response.

Ellana furrowed her brow, regarding him with awe and confusion. "I have never known magic like that before," she breathed.

A soft laugh. He kissed along her neck, stopping to nip at the point of her ear. "Shall I presume that meant you enjoyed it?"

"Gods, yes." She gave a lustful whine, her fingers seeking the laces of his breeches. He stiffened when her hands brushed over the hardened ridge of his arousal, hissing a breath, though she did not linger to tease him. "Ar isalathe ma."

His answer was little more than a deep rasp. "Ma nuvenin."

Solas moved to stand, remove the last of his clothes, but he never got past his knees. Ellana wrapped a leg around his waist and pushed, unbalancing him. He fell onto his side with a grunt of surprise, and quickly, she mounted him. She swallowed his moan as she ground into his erection. Offering one of her own as his hips jerked in response, and his hands ran rough along her back. The texture of his palms was divine; from the coarse callouses where he gripping his staff to the plush tips of his fingers made supple from years of casting.

Eager hands leapt to his waist, worrying at the lacings until she could tear his breeches down his hips. He kicked them off, barely managing a breath before she had worked to free him from the
last of his clothes. He stilled as she took him in hand, and a guttural sound he couldn’t quite stifle rumbled from his chest. Fists balled at her sides. She gave an exploratory stroke before lowering herself over him, not yet taking him in but gauging his need. Slick folds kissed along his length, watching as he twitched and shook. He inhaled sharply through his teeth; pushing the back of his head into the mattress. The sound made her stomach twist and knot. She teased him with another wet stroke, and the next noise was more whimper than groan.

"Ah," he choked. "Ellana." His voice was dry, and it cracked as he spoke. _Plead_. The slight tremor in it made her bite her lip. Excited and nervous and a little incredulous that he was truly lying naked beneath her, his hands on her body and hers on his cock; teasing kisses from her lips and all but trembling as he waited for her to take him in.

She stilled then, and let her forehead rest against his own as she guided him. With a shaking breath, she sank down over his length. The grip on her hips tightened to a bruising grasp, digging deep crescents into her skin. He _groaned_. A sound equal measures need and relief. Pushed through tightly clenched teeth as he tried – and failed – to control its volume. It was uniquely vulnerable, and _incredibly_ arousing. She seated herself to the hilt with a strained, "Ah!" as he stretched her to her fullest.

They stayed a moment that way, waiting, breathing, and feeling how their bodies fit together.

Then she took hold of his shoulders, and began to rock.

They moved as one. Enmeshed and heady. Filled to bursting with the curled tension and sweet relief that came of consummating a year’s worth of slow seduction. A sharp string of Elvish tumbled from Solas’ lips; words Ellana did not quite understand but could guess the meaning of all the same. Ancient prayers and sacred praises. She longed to hear more. To feel the vibration of his voice against her lips as she kissed the smooth lines of his throat. Breathing in his familiar scent of paint, copper and earth. Now mixed with the intoxicating musk of sex. Her tongue ducked out to taste the sweat on his skin as she nuzzled into the crook of his neck, and she felt, more than heard, the growl it elicited.

He thrust his fingers deep into the tangled mess of her hair. She was moaning; the sound swallowed by his fevered kisses as he wound the wefts around his fingers. He grabbed a handful from the base of her skull and _pulled_. With a sharp gasp, her head rolled back, exposing her throat. A feral growl rumbled from his chest and he dove for her, sinking his teeth into the tender flesh at the junction of her neck. She cried out, and clenched around him. Their rhythm stuttered as his hips bucked in response, a groan muffled into her shoulder as he laved at the mark with his tongue. And there would be a mark, she knew.

The thought of walking about the fortress the next day with the evidence of their tryst under the collar of her shirt sent a thrill through her.

His quiet oaths in Elvish dissolved into something less coherent as their slow and even pace began to quicken. As she ground harder, his body tensed and arced. Each deep thrust stretched her wide, more pleasure than pain, and urged soft sighs from parted lips.

And every subtle flutter of her slick walls around him sent a rush through his skin that had him gasping short, staccato breaths against her neck. Pleasure so potent it was near to agony.

It was not long before both were panting. A symphony of moans and needy whines echoed through the room. Cries at the peak of each rutting thrust. Solas’ hands slid to her hips and pushed, gently urging her to sit up. He groaned when she obeyed and the position awarded her a deeper seat of him. He was shuddering, a quake that began in his thighs and worked its way up through his
stomach as he struggled to hold his peak at bay. Fingers crawled along the back of her hips, moving to the dip in her spine just above her rear, where he splayed his fingers. With a gesture, he sank a torrent of mana into her.

The result was immediate, and intense. White behind her eyes, screwed shut, as her body buckled. Hands bracing against his chest. She called his name, a prayer as much as a question. It was clear to her he was left in a similar state by the way his body tensed and curled beneath her.

It felt similar to the ‘connection’ spell he had performed earlier… in the way a light breeze was comparable to a hurricane. Where that was a pulse, this was a crashing wave. In an instant, her skin was alight with sensation: her own as well as his. All at once she felt the touch of his hands, the squeeze of her legs at his sides, the slick of her spreading over his thighs, drumming hearts and hitched breaths. An ageless longing; drunk on lust as he watched her undulate over him.

It had been so, so long.

Not a year but tens, thousands – a hundred lifetimes worth of waiting that lead them to connect in this single moment of ecstasy. Time seemed to stretch and roll, meaningless amidst the rocking of their bodies and the cacophony of shared sensation. There was no war, no Skyhold, no one else in existence except the two of them. Enmeshed in an endless dance made for pleasure.

For the first time in memory, she could feel magic in the air around her. The way it tingled on her skin and how each breath drew mana from the Veil that filled her lungs. Swirling. Searing. Tight and tense and tearing through her veins. It was overwhelming. Warmth that wrapped their bodies together in a blanket of thrilling energy as they rocked, deep, working each other toward inevitable release.

His fingers dug deeper into her skin, and the wave that surged over them both tore a sob from her throat. A shift of energy, and then a keening moan began from somewhere deep within her chest. As she crested, his breathy groans turned to louder, longer sounds.

“Ellana,” he called. The timbre of his cry told her it was a warning as much as a praise. “Ellana, fenedhis... Ell-ah!”

Light and heat shot through her body. An explosion of sparks that began behind her eyes and spread all the way out to her curled toes. It tore through her like an angry wave and she rode it hard. It felt as though the very air around her crackled with energy. And she was crying out as it spread over her. Enveloped her. Her body quaking and twisting as her climax pushed ever higher. Somehow, she could feel his, not simply as a pulse inside her but as a swirl of sensation where they joined. Just as she felt the relief of being filled, she could feel the clench. The welcoming depth of her own body. Warm. Wet. The flutter and squeeze of her core pulling more and more out of him as he came. Harder than he ever had before. It did not seem real, and yet, she was lost to it… until slowly, gradually, the energy began to fade.

The sensation of depth and heat ebbed like a receding tide, leaving her buzzing with pleasured relief as his hands slipped away from her and the casting ceased.

Spent and sated, she collapsed upon him. He slung an arm across her back, but did not seem to have the strength left to hold her. Instead, they simply lay together. Breathing. Hearts still pounding in sync.

They stayed that way for an age. Until they gained back enough breath to speak.

"That was..." Ellana managed. But any more she’d wished to say was lost. The air was still too
heavy, and her mind still to addled, to find words.

"Yes," he agreed. A huff of breathy laughter followed.

Solas tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and leaned in for a soft, tender kiss. She gave a soft sigh as she returned it, her tongue leisurely plucking the bow of his lip. Playfully, she tugged it with her teeth before pulling away. When she looked at him, it was to find him smiling fondly.

Something tugged at her, then. He seemed more at ease than she had ever seen. The ever-present crease in his brow was gone. Smoothed away. The frown replaced by a gentle, lazy smile that looked natural on his face despite the fact that she had never seen it before. The luminous sheen of sweat on his skin made him look younger than ever.

He was… content.

And when he looked at her, she saw only love in his eyes. That darkness he had always carried had been chased away, at least for now. In its wake was a man who looked as much vulnerable as he was happy. As much as she wanted to love what she saw, it only made her heart clench. Why, if he loved her so much, had he never allowed them to come together this way before? Was this so wrong?

She tried to banish the thoughts as she laid her head down upon his chest. Sighing in contentment when his fingers traced lazy circles over her back. His heart beat a soothing rhythm beneath her ear. There was only comfort and respite to be found here, in this moment, and so she allowed herself to surrender to it. It was as though she had taken her first, gasping breath after months of struggling for air. After so long spent chained to her tension, the relief was palpable.

Tears pricked the corners her eyes. Then soon fell. A rush of confusion and embarrassment surged through her. She darted a hand to her eyes to wipe them away before he would notice, but was not fast enough.

Solas' cradled her. One hand at the back of her head, and the other wrapped tight around her shoulders. "Sssh," he cooed. "It's alright." He pressed a kiss to her crown.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, struggling to dam the flow of tears. It seemed to come without end now and nothing she could do would hold it back. Shame heated her face. "I'm— I don't know why..."

His hold on her tightened. "No," he said softly. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Ellana." A sigh. "You were right."

She lifted her head to look at him, sniffling. "What do you mean?"

The corner of his mouth lifted, but the smile was empty. "I am a coward. I always have been." He wiped at her cheek with a thumb. "Ir abelas, ma vhenan."

Her eyes darted between his, searching. Curious and confused. She felt as though there was more there, something underneath the surface that ran much deeper than an apology for pushing her away. But for now, this was enough. This was all she needed. She kissed him again. Tender and loving, and he cradled her face with both hands and swept away her tears.

She shifted, curling around him. One hand on his chest and a leg slung over his waist. Solas wrapped both his arms around her, pulling her close and tucking her face into his neck.

"Stay," she whispered.
His fingers wound into her hair as he nuzzled her. "Ma nuvenin."

Chapter End Notes

1. Ever been so wound full of tension, stress, and a desperate need for intimacy that you've cried after sex? A release that releases *everything* you were hanging onto? I've always found it as embarrassing as it is relieving. After everything that's happened between these two, I can imagine it happening for her.

2. The "connection" magic was my take on the rather silly codex about sex in the Vir Dirthara, and the implication that intimacy between ancient elves was very much a merging of selves; of energy and sensation. At least that's what I got out of it. I expand a bit more on the concept in either the next chapter, or the one after—depends on where I cut it. The next one will either be 100% angst followed by a more fluffy chapter, or just one big long one that's 80% angst and 20% fluff/smut. HAHA DISREGARD THAT I SUCK COCKS.

Tumblr, for updates, DA:I stuff and prompts:
http://www.tumblr.com/bdafic

TRANSLATIONS:

Fenedhis = A common curse
Ar lath ma = I love you
Felas = Slow
Odhea = Breathe
Ar isalathe ma = I need you. Specifically, sexual need.
Ma nuvenin = As you wish
Ir abelas = I'm sorry
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

I stole some Trespasser dialogue for this because it fit better than anything I could try to write.

A note on timing: this story takes place in the space after the temple visit, after the breakup, but before the Inquisitor meets Flemeth/Mythal either by way of the Eluvian or that summoning thing (depending on your world state, personally I think the eluvian bit is way better). Not sure if I'll end up mentioning the meeting in this story - probably not, as I don't think it relates to the 'plot' - but I figure I should mention the timing for context purposes. In game, a Dalish Inquisitor believes in the pantheon as divines until post-Temple of Mythal. If you drink from the well, you have an angry exchange with Solas where your Inquisitor can say outright, "You said the gods weren't real" after he tells you that you're Mythal's "creature". He'll reply that he never said that, instead he said they were not "gods" then sort of hedges around what he believes them to be instead. If you don't drink from the well, that exchange does not happen, which implies that the Inquisitor still believes in the gods as gods - divine beings - rather than as, like, elves. Also that she sort of resents the fact that Solas doesn't believe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was still dark when Ellana woke. The moon was full and high. The light shining through the lattices cast long, criss-crossing shadows along the bedroom floor. The curtains hanging by open windows fluttered softly in the wind. It was quiet, and peaceful. She could not say how long she had spent in blessedly dreamless sleep, but the faint orange glow of embers dying in the hearth told her it had been at least a few hours.

For a moment, she thought it had all been a dream. A terrible, wonderful dream. Then in the next breath, she could smell him on her skin. On her bed. Feel the lightness of her body, drained and sated from the sweet relief of their lovemaking. The slight pinch of sore muscles that had gone too long without use. And the sticky remnants of his release on her thighs. She smiled, and reached out for him, only to find herself alone in bed. She turned. There was a faint impression of his body in the sheets beside her, but it was no longer even warm where he had once laid. Confused, she scanned the room. It appeared empty.

She sat up. "Solas?"

"I am here," came his voice. He was near the open doors of the balcony, seated in a chair he had taken from her desk. Dressed in his breeches and nothing else. Chin in hand; he looked out over the mountains. Idly fingering the jawbone necklace that hung at his chest. He did not turn to face her when he spoke.

Ellana gathered the sheet around her naked body and knotted it at her breast, then slipped from the bed, stepping over to join him. He did not greet her as she approached, too lost in his thoughts to have noticed. When she reached him, she touched a hand to his bare shoulder. It was cool – he had
been sitting there for some time.

"I thought you'd left again," she said quietly.

He covered her hand with his and gave it a small, reassuring squeeze. "No," he murmured. His head inclined a little in her direction, but still he did not face her.

She frowned. "Can you not sleep?"

There was a moment’s pause before he replied. "In a manner of speaking."

Ellana regarded him curiously. It was the kind of evasive answer she was accustomed to receiving from him, regardless of the question, but something about his cadence sounded off, somehow.

"Are you alright?" she asked. Slowly, she walked a circle around the chair until she came to stand in front of him. His eyes met hers only briefly before glancing away, and the sight of him gave her a start. His eyes were red-rimmed and slightly swollen, bordered by dark circles. For a moment, he looked impossibly old, tired, and so very far away.

"Solas, are you—? Have you been—?"

Crying?

She dropped to her knees upon the flagstone floor, placing a hand on his thigh. "What is it?"

In an instant, his demeanor had shifted. The brief glimpse of something she had seen was gone. Safely tucked away. And then he was giving her a smile that was clearly intended to be comforting, though the gesture did little to ease her worry when it did not reach his eyes. "Do not concern yourself with me, vhenan, I am fine," he said softly.

She looked at him, as much bewildered as offended by his response. It was an obvious fiction, and it pained her to hear it. One might employ this manner of casual dismissal with a curious child, rather than a lover. A pat on the head and a gentle redirection. It was clear he was unaccustomed to sharing much, if anything, about himself; he kept his hurt and his heart well-guarded. A trait they had in common. Nevertheless, it was difficult not to feel stung by the dishonesty. The lie rolled off his tongue with practiced ease. An answer given to her the same as he would a stranger.

He found familiar comfort in walls and solitude, she knew. And perhaps it would be easier to endure – to dismiss as a quirk of his personality – if it was not so abundantly clear that what lay beneath was the cause of his current unrest. Caused him to leave her bed, and sit alone with only his thoughts as company. A slave to the weight of a darkness he would not trust another to help him carry. Even one he loved.

She wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake him.

But instead, "That's not an answer," she asserted. A little less gently than she had intended. He held her gaze a moment, the corner of his lips and one brow twitching as though to pull into frown, before he turned his eyes back to the night sky. Choosing to remain silent.

She thought of how different he had looked after they had made love: the expression of quiet contentment on his face. Glimpses of truth, and contentment. It was a side of himself he had never been willing to share with her before. For a moment, he had trusted her with that. With himself. Yet, there seemed to be no trace of that now. Instead, that familiar distance had settled between them. There was a storm in his eyes. Tension in his brow. He was pulling back again.
With a hard sigh, she caught his chin with her fingers and tilted his face back toward her own. "Dirthai ma, Solas."

In reply, he took her hand in both of his and brought it to his mouth. Kissed her fingertips. Brushed his lips against the back of her knuckles. "Another time, perhaps." The gesture clearly meant to soothe her with its intimacy. Direct her away from further questions. However, after all that had happened between them that night, she was too tired to keep playing this game.

She wrenched her hand free from his grasp, and stood. "No." The force in her tone startled him. He stilled then, the smile faltering. "No more of this, Solas! Something troubles you deeply, and if you still cannot trust me enough to talk to me even after taking me to bed I fear we will be left in this dance forever!"

His lips parted as if to speak, but after a moment of thought, he closed them again. Pressing his mouth into a hard line. Whether his silence persisted because he had no answer to give, or because he had reconsidered the one he’d prepared, she was not sure. That familiar crease in his brow returned. The one that appeared when he puzzled over something. Overthinking.

She looked at him pleadingly. Searching. Wanting. Anything. Even the smallest and most insignificant hint at what upset him would be better than his infernal silence.

It was not hard to draw the lines; this was about their fight. About sex. About them and whatever they had become now. Whatever it was that drove him away from her before still weighed heavily upon him now. Something he could not shake. And she feared that until he did, their relationship was doomed to continue along the same path it had before. Eventually, his worries and his darkness would build to a point where he could no longer tolerate it, he would push her away, leave again, and try to mask his feelings; then inevitably, passion would draw them back together, and the cycle would start anew.

It was infuriating.

Presently, he held her gaze. Moonlight glinting in his ice blue eyes. For an instant, it caught what looked like the remnants of tears at the corners, and her heart clenched. Suddenly, venting her anger at him did not seem like the best path anymore.

With eyes closed she took a deep breath and slowly let it back out; a conscious effort to release some of the hurt his continued silence had caused her. When she was certain she had put aside her malice, she brought a hand to his cheek. Cupped his jaw, and earnestly plead, "I do not want to lose this again."

Something in his expression shifted. The frown gave way to a wistful sort of sadness. He lifted a hand to hers, fingertips sketching a delicate touch to her wrist. "Nor I," he admitted after a time. There was that, at least. The smallest concession. The corner of her lips lifted with a small smile.

"You once told me that it had been a long time since you’d trusted another," she implored. Stroking his cheek with a thumb. "Trust me. Am I not worth your honesty?"

The crease in his brow eased, just a little. "Yes," he agreed quietly. Then, "You always have been," he added, looking away. As though too ashamed to meet her eye.

"Then why not talk to me, Solas?"

He shook his head. "It is…" he stopped, considering. Turning the words over in his mind before finally settling on "Complicated." A pause and a halting breath before he explained, "I do not wish
to hurt you more than I already have.”

“And this is the answer?” she demanded. “To push me away again?” The words came out little too quick, a little too hard, as she reeled against a tide of emotion. The want to fight him. Force him to tell her everything he had hid away. Then, a sudden fear struck her, and with it, a new wave of anxiety surged in her chest. She pulled her hands away from him, clenching them into tight fists. “Do you regret this?” Her voice sounded small, betraying any confidence the moment of anger had awarded her.

The reply came without hesitation. “No,” he said firmly, eyes snapping to hers. Solas leaned forward in the chair and reached for her. Taking her left fist in his hands, he cradled it. Gently working to unfurl her fingers. Then slipped his hand into her palm. The light of the anchor seemed to swell beneath his touch – warming just a little – as his fingertips mapped the lines and breaks in her skin around the magic. A trick of the mind, she decided. No one could draw the magic in her palm that way except her.

“I do not regret you, Ellana. It is…” he trailed off, shaking his head again. “I suspect that what I must tell you is considerably more than you are prepared to hear.”

He met her eyes then, and for the briefest moment, she saw past them. Through them. Into that chasm hidden just below the surface. Where flickers of his doubt showed through as the mask began to falter. The subtle movement of a brow and the pull of his lips communicated far more in that moment than his words ever could. Then all at once, she understood the reason for his hesitation. It was not distrust, nor lack of care, that stilled his tongue – it was fear. His own admission of it echoed in her mind: I am a coward. I always have been. He was afraid. Of letting someone in. Of rejection.

Dying alone.

Gently, she grasped his hand and took a step backward. Urging. He frowned, confused, but allowed her to pull him to stand. For a moment, they remained that way. Silent and still, bathed in the moonlight that shone through the open balcony. Hands loosely clasped together between them. His eyes darted between hers. Cautious and unsure. Then her lips curled into a little smile, and she wrapped her arms around him. He resisted at first, tensing against the unfamiliar. It had been so long since he had been held, or cradled, with any affection. Since anyone had offered him such a thing. Yet the instant her body pressed flush against his own, he sank into the embrace. Bringing his arms up to encircle her and return the hug. His head dropping to her shoulder.

She let him stay that way for a while. Holding her, and being held. Breathing. Waiting, until she felt a little more of the tension in his shoulders slip away, and he tucked his face into her neck, nuzzling at her just a little.

“Ar lath ma, Solas,” she whispered. “I am not afraid of your troubles. Please.”

His hold on her tightened. Needy and vulnerable as he pulled her closer. With her body pressed so close to his, she could feel as his heart began to race. A steady pounding that grew louder as the silence stretched on. She had never seen him this way – not just anxious, but strangely fragile. Afraid. Of his thoughts, perhaps. Of her, and what she would think if he could bring himself to speak of them. It worried her more than she would like to admit. She had seen him face death a hundred times, work tirelessly to heal injuries both complicated and grave, manoeuvre himself and their companions out of dangerous situations with ease – and yet had never seen him truly shaken. It seemed that his only real weakness was his own darkness; and with how little she knew of him,
there was something about that which was deeply unsettling.

He was quiet for a very long time.

After a while, Ellana began to wonder if he would choose not to speak at all that night. If, instead, he would merely consider her words, and they would hold each other like this until his thoughts were soothed enough that they could return to bed. Tangle together, and sleep.

At some point, he had raised his head from her shoulder and she had tucked her face against his neck. Her lips brushed over his pulse. Kissed it gently. Still, it raced. He stroked her hair, winding tresses around twitching fingers and fidgeting with soft curls. Distractions for idle hands.

When he finally spoke, his voice was barely a whisper. “I have not been honest with you,” he said. “About who I am. About what I am.”

“That much is obvious,” Ellana replied quietly. She tried to keep her tone light. “You have told me very little of yourself. There was not much to be dishonest about, Solas.”

She could hear the little smile in his voice. “Yes,” he agreed. “I suppose you’re right.”

Something occurred to her then, and she pulled away just enough to look upon his face. To gauge his reaction when she asked him, “Are you… a spy? An agent?”

He blinked. And for a moment, she thought perhaps she had guessed correctly. But then his lips quirked into a strange sort of smile that he managed to hold for only a second before he laughed. The sound a little breathless. A little desperate. “No,” he managed, shaking his head. “But were it that simple.” Then the smile fell as quickly as it had come, and his brows drew together again.

With a steadying breath, “Alright,” she urged. “So tell me who you are.”

He swallowed. Shifted his weight. Hesitated. "The deception has only grown more difficult as this – we – have continued. I would not –” he faltered, cleared his throat, and tried again. “I had no want to lie to you. It was necessary, at first. However, I did not expect to find someone like you. To fall in love with you.” He was rambling, she knew. Hedging. Avoiding the whole truth and talking a circle around apologies and excuses.

She decided to let him. If that was what he needed to do, to prepare himself, she could be patient.

"Love tends to happen that way," she offered lightly. His shoulders shook with soft laughter, and it soothed her nerves somewhat.

"True."

They fell quiet again.

A shiver ran through her as his fingers curled around another weft of hair, then drew a line up the shell of her ear, stopping to swirl at the point before running back along the inner edge. He traced her features as if he were mapping them. Committing little parts of her to memory. Just in case he would not get the chance to touch her again.

It wasn’t a pleasant feeling.

Another moment passed before his idle touches began to stutter. An indication of the effort it took him to gather his thoughts, to steel himself. He said, "All the more reason you deserve the truth. You have deserved it from the beginning.” A defeated sigh. “I should never have returned your
affections without it. It was… selfish."

She let the silence encourage him. Give him the time to find his voice.

Beneath the touch of her hand upon his chest, she felt his pulse spike. He took a steadying breath, and finally began.

"You have often inquired into my knowledge of the People. The Elvhenan Empire, Arlathan, Elvish language... The answers I have given you – my experience – I have told you that I learned these things from my journeys in the Fade,” he explained. “While it is true I have learned much there, far more than anyone else alive, I would think, that is not where my knowledge originates.” Ellana lifted her head, regarding him with equal measures curiosity and apprehension. He slid a hand against her jaw, cupping it in his palm. "It was my home."

It took a moment for the meaning of his words to register. The shock hit her like a wave of frost. Prickling the hair at the back of her neck and freezing the blood in her veins. Her lips parted, and she could not catch the gasp that escaped them. “That’s…”

_Not possible._

And yet...

A hundred little mysteries began to click into place; pieces of a larger puzzle she never knew she had been struggling to complete. Memories, stories, _language_. Even his build: tall and broad-shouldered like a human. He resembled the sentinels at the Temple of Mythal more than any Dalish or city elf she had ever known.

A memory pushed its way to the forefront of her mind’s eye, Solas’ cryptic, careful words as he spoke to Abelas.

_Your people yet linger._

She took a step back, out of his embrace, and his hands fell heavily at his sides. Her eyes frantically roved over his body, bare chest and shoulders, as though she had never truly seen him. He was _covered_ in scars. Old – _impossibly old_ – and so numerous that she was struck by how it was possible she had never noticed before. A hundred thousand little footprints left by the passage through a long and difficult life. With trembling fingers, she drew a line along the thick ridge of a notable mark on his side, between his ribs. The injury looked as though it had been caused by the strike of a dagger. Or an arrow. An attempt to puncture a lung, surely. If the strike had been deep enough, it would have been fatal. He tensed when she touched him, but did not resist her exploration.

The weight of ignorance settled over her like a heavy cloak. For the first time, it truly occurred to her how little she knew of the man she loved. He had always been an enigma. It was part of what first drew her to him. The mystery of his character felt playful and attractive. But this…

When she met his gaze, she could plainly see the apprehension in his eyes as he waited for her response. Her voice cracked when she spoke. “You are _Elvhen._”

“Yes,” he affirmed, tipping his chin downward a little.

She let out a shaking breath, drawing her brows together in wonder. “How old are you?”

Solas shook his head. “I do not know,” he answered honestly. “The calendars have changed.” His eyes never left hers. Pleading, and saddened. Like prey, caught, and resigned to their fate.
There was more, she knew. She could see it in his face. Countless secrets brimming just below the surface, bubbling over as the cup tipped.

It was the dread she saw in him that worried her the most. By the time this was over, he expected her to flee.

“You lived in Arlathan,” she said, awestruck. Needing to hear the words spoken aloud before she could even attempt to accept them as truth. “Before the Fall.” Slowly, he nodded. She swallowed. Throat tight and words heavy and swollen in her mouth. Her thoughts raced, struggling to reconcile the knowledge of ages past and the expanse of time with the man who stood before her. Legends and stories come to life. Her voice took on a deeper register as she had counted it up in her head. “Solas that was more than two thousand years ago. You—” A sudden thought struck her that made her stomach twist with fear. Nausea rose in her gut. She could taste the bile in her throat as she took a panicked step away from him, clutching the knotted sheets at her breast for support. “If you’re—and we’ve—Creators.” She swore under her breath, eyes widening. “You’re immortal,” she blurted.

“I am,” he replied cautiously. Eyes narrowing as he struggled to understand the path of her thoughts; what had caused her such sudden fear. She ran a palm roughly over her face, up into her hair. Solas reached for her, but she pushed his hand away, shaking her head.

Her tongue felt thick. Clumsy, in her efforts to speak. “I’ve—have I… hurt you?”

“Hurt me?” He repeated, confused.

“You… you’re immortal,” she said again. “You have not quickened. But, if we’ve been together —?”

His face fell, and in an instant, he had closed the distance between them and gathered her in his arms. “No,” he assured. “No, no, no. Vhenan, that is not…” A shuddering sigh against her hair. “You could never hurt me.”

She trembled in his embrace. Arms folded between their bodies and pushed up against his chest. A hand slid up her spine, came to rest against the back of her head, gently urging her into the crook of his neck. Her fingers clutched at his skin, grabbed hold of the leather cord of his necklace and wrapped it tight around her fingers. Searching for something tangible to hang onto amidst a storm of thoughts. She struggled to make sense of the troubling mix of new truths and old beliefs. Dizzy and uncertain. Knees weak and threatening to give out beneath her.

There were so many missing pieces, so many questions. She tried to find enough presence of mind to pull even one from the torrent. It took some time before she was able to speak again.

“The sentinels in the Temple of Mythal,” she asked finally. “Abelas… Are you the same?”

“Only in that we are both Elvhen,” Solas explained. “The sentinels are bound by the magics of the temple, and by Mythal’s will. They remain under a geas, resting in uthenera until the wards are disturbed. They wake only to defend, and are held in servitude forever unless released from their duties by her order – her magic. I am bound to no one but myself.”

She pulled back in surprise. “You said the gods weren’t real.”

“No, Ellana. I said they were not gods,” he corrected with a shake of his head. “They were rulers. Powerful mages.” A pause as his brows pulled into a deep frown, his gaze lowering. “And horrible tyrants.”
“Tyrants?”

“They were monsters.” The timbre of his voice took on a darker edge, then. Something old and bitter. His expression hard as stone when he spoke. “Greedy, sadistic, and obsessed with their own power. Andruil hunted and tormented her kin for sport. Dirthamen’s trade of secrets and lies caused countless to fall to ruin, losing everything to his machinations. Elgar’nan and Falon’din slaughtered tens of thousands on a whim, simply because they did not think the People feared them enough!” Disgust and hatred coloured his words, bleeding from his voice like ichor. He spat and seethed as if even forming the sounds of their names left ash in his mouth.

Lost to the fervor of his confession, he let his hands fall away from their embrace. Turning, he walked out onto the empty balcony and approached the railing. He leaned heavily onto the edge, hands grasping so hard that his knuckles blanched. Tension rippled through his shoulders.

He continued, “A simple disagreement between them could start a civil war. To settle it, they would conscript thousands to fight at their behest—for years, decades even!—for their amusement. They demanded worship, sacrifice—” A huff of biting laughter escaped him, and he shook his head. “—Endless displays of wealth and power. Hallowed statuary and opulent temples. Idols built by the bloodied hands of the People. People they forced into eternal servitude for no other reason than to prove that they could!” Anger flashed in his eyes as he turned to face her, his lip twisted in a sneer. The unadulterated look of rage upon his face reminded her of the day he burned the mages in the Exalted Plains. Men who bound and killed the spirit of wisdom. The only friend he had ever professed to having in all the time she had known him.

It was frightening.

He seemed to take note of her apprehension, and a moment passed where he simply looked at her. Quiet. His eyes closed for the space of a few breaths, and he was visibly calmer when he opened them again. He lifted a hand and gestured toward her. "And they marked their slaves with a magical brand, to track and control, so that everyone would know who they belonged to."

Her fingers darted to her face. Tracing lines over her cheeks, bare skin once marked with a rite of passage she had worn as a symbol of devotion her whole life. Until…

"The Vallaslin," she whispered. "When you removed it, you said they were slave markings. I didn't truly understand..."

He softened. "I did not tell you to the whole truth of it then, because it would have only lead to more questions."

The whole truth.

Each new revelation was like an arrow to the chest. The Gods. Her Gods. A glittering pantheon her people had spent millennia paying tribute to. Worshipped and beloved as benevolent creators who loved and cherished their people. Who protected them from evil and built an empire more beautiful and precious than anything Thedas had ever known before, or since.

All lies.

Was there truly nothing her people had preserved? A millennia of struggle to retain what was lost, to hold onto the last remaining threads of their history—and this was what they were left with? How had it all become so twisted? Was there even a fraction of truth left in the legends, or had their entire identity been crafted from a grand fiction? A pantomime made from the propaganda of despots. The Gods were monsters. Slavers. Cruel and manipulative. No better than the magisters of
modern Tevinter. Two thousand years of time between the fall of Elvhenan and modern day had managed to warp the memory of the People’s oppression into reverence. Even the brands that once were burned into their skin at the hands of cruel masters were worn today as a badge of pride.

She felt sick.

Disgraced by a life spent in worship of the pantheon. Rituals and songs. Stories and sacrifice. Lit incense and bowls of fruit at the feet of old statues. Dances and prayers to keep them sated and curses to ward against evil. Willing supplicants who bowed to the long-empty thrones of those who would have seen them as little more than dogs at their feet. And kicked them away, laughing.

Tears pricked her eyes, threatening to fall on flushed cheeks. She mourned the loss of a culture she never truly had, and a history she had never truly known. For the first time, she understood Solas’ distain for her people. What she mistook as purely arrogance was in part his frustration. And truly, why would anyone believe him if he tried to approach them? To teach? Even if he had come to them as Elvhen, his knowledge went against hundreds if not thousands of years of devoted worship. It was a fool’s errand.

No wonder he avoided the Dalish.

When she finally spoke again, her voice sounded so quiet and meek that she could scarcely recognize it.

"How did such terrible people come to be regarded as Gods?"

Solas closed his eyes. Pushed a hard breath through his nose. "It started with a war," he intoned. "War breeds fear. Fear breeds a desire for simplicity. Good and evil. Right and wrong. Chains of command. After the war ended, generals became respected elders, then kings, then finally gods. The Evanuris."


He nodded. “A title, meant to intimidate. To set them apart from the rest of the People. They were never gods, but their command of magic was both wondrous and terrifying. Understand, at that time magic flowed throughout the world, and the ability to manipulate it came naturally. There was no distinction of ‘mage’ because there did not need to be – using magic was as natural and instinctual as drawing breath. Still, the Evanuris’ power was immense. At first, they used that power for good. To fight for, and protect, the Elvhen people. The People respected that power. In time, they learned to fear it.” Shaking his head, he turned away from her. Back to the mountains.

“The People suffered, and I could not stand idly by and do nothing.”

The implication hung in the air between them. Heavy. When understanding struck, Ellana’s eyes widened. “You fought against the Evanuris?” At his solemn nod, she blustered, “How? If they were so powerful?”

At his sides, his hands flexed in and out of tight fists. “I used my power and my connections to build a network of spies and soldiers. I freed slaves, removed their Vallaslin and brought them into sanctuaries where they could recover safely. Then, I trained them. Armed them. They fought at my side, and for my cause.”

“You saved them,” Ellana breathed, her voice reverent. “You were a hero, Solas.”

“My conscience is far from clear,” he insisted. He could feel her eyes on him, awed and inspired, but could not bring himself to look at her. Not now. His voice dropped to near a whisper. “I have
spilled more blood in my lifetime than you can possibly imagine. You do not lead a rebellion against immortal mage-kings without getting your hands bloody.”

As she looked at him, crumpled over the balcony and staring at his empty palms, it was not difficult to see the thousands of years of strife that aged him.

The more he talked, the more she began to understand the peculiar riddles of his character. Mannerisms that seemed jarring and out of place on a homeless, wandering apostate, fit all too well on an ancient Elvhen general. The tense way he carried himself, and the façade of cool reserve he wore so well. Intimate knowledge of the tactics and politics of war. The passion in his arguments with Dorian about Tevinter’s institute of slavery, and the way he seemed to take personal offense to Rainier's deception. In particular, the fact that he was not the experienced soldier he had claimed to be. That he had not seen the horrors of war, and knew the pain of taking lives for a cause. For a time, he had found a kindred… discovering the lie had robbed him of one of the few connections he’d made. Highlighted his isolation, his loneliness, all over again.

The secrets he hid were not as far below the surface as he would like to believe.

As she listened, she looked back over the year they had spent at each other’s side and realized just how many little cracks there had been in his mask. Little clues and inconsistencies. She wondered if he was even aware of it. Did he know how often he slipped, or was it his passion and the desire for companionship – for kin – that had caused pieces of truth to spill out from time to time?

How long had it been, she wondered, since he had felt the loving touch of another person before this night?

With that thought, she approached him. Carefully lay a hand on his back between his shoulder blades. A small gesture of tenderness, and love. He shuddered, briefly leaned in, but ultimately he shrugged it off. Not yet ready to accept her affection in the wake of his confessions. Her hand slipped away as he stood.

Guilt and anger sat heavy in his chest, giving a strained edge to his voice when he spoke again. "And then they killed Mythal." His eyes found hers now, pleading. "Their lust for power and their greed had driven them mad. She did not deserve such a fate. She was sympathetic to my rebellion – and it made her a threat to their growing power – for that, they destroyed her. When it was done, they promised to murder thousands more in my name as punishment for my plot against them. To destroy and conquer all in their wounded pride. They would have destroyed the world had they the chance. I had to stop them."

The truth he was carefully weaving between his words had begun to form into something tangible well before he had finished speaking. It prickled at the back of her thoughts. A dark feeling, wrapped up in old fears. Like a child who stared too long at shadows on the wall and thought their nightmares came to life. It was something she did not want to admit to. Wasn’t ready for.

She resisted.

Fought against it, kicking and screaming. Shaking her head as if to rid herself physically of the first flickers of understanding.

But it did not work.

Everything he had admitted, all his confessions, were quickly tumbling into a single, undeniable truth. But instead of the relief she’d expected to feel, there was only a creeping, cold sense of dread spreading up the back of her neck. Her thoughts were frantic: wars, slaves, gods, kings, murder and
rebellion. Rebel gods.

Her eyes dropped to the pendant he wore around his neck, tied with leather cord. Fangs on a jawbone.

A wolf's jawbone.

The book on his desk.

Her heart dropped into her stomach.

“How—” she managed, and swallowed hard. “How did you stop them?”

But she knew the answer before it came. She could see it written in every line of his face as he stared back at her with wide, wet eyes.

“I locked them away.”

Nausea surged with such intensity that she nearly retched, her throat closing tightly against the swell. It stole her breath. A strangled hiccup was all that escaped as her body lurched forward. Knees weak, almost buckling against the strain. She pressed a shaking hand to her mouth to quell the tide. “No,” she choked; shaking her head and taking a step away from him. Eyes wide. Darkness impressed at the corners of her vision. “That’s not true.” Her mouth twisted into a sob. Anger, shock and fear roiled fiercely in her gut. “It’s not true,” she repeated. Pleading. Demanding. *Give me any other answer and I’ll believe it,* her thoughts begged of him. *Any other one. Please.*

But he didn’t. Couldn’t. He just stared back at her, and she knew.

It felt like the floor was giving way beneath her feet. Little pieces of reality breaking apart and floating off. Any moment now, the walls of her room would crash down around her. All of Skyhold would break apart. The very world would cave in, and then she would wake from this dream. This nightmare in which he stood at the center.

Amidst her panic, she uttered a quiet prayer. "Mythal'enaste lasa em." It was automatic; a habit left over from a lifetime of prayer and worship, he knew, but Solas could not help but wince when he heard it fall from her lips.

He did not pursue her as she retreated from him.

"Ir abelas, ma vhenan,” he whispered, defeated. An apology that echoed distant and broken in the empty room. It was all he had to give her, and it would never be near enough. As she backed away in quick, halting steps, he screwed his eyes shut. He could not bear to see the fear so plain upon her face when she looked at him.

Ellana clawed at her own skin as though she could rip her searing lungs from her chest to force them more breath. The air was too thin. She was suffocating. Drowning beneath a tide of terror and wonder. The blood frozen in her veins. Even as her mind screamed at her not to believe – *tricks, lies, deceit* – she knew it had to be true. It was all true. The last missing piece had been pushed into place, and now she could finally view the whole picture. *The whole truth.* The impossible things that had stood before her all this time. Legends, myths and wonders wrapped in humble guise.

A wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Flickers of memory played in her mind’s eye. Fast and furious, and almost too quick to latch onto.
The first time she felt butterflies in her stomach when he smiled at her, his eyes twinkling. An infatuation had taken hold, and she thought him so attractive in that moment that her mouth went dry. Roses bloomed on her cheeks. For an instant, she had wondered what it would be like to taste his lips. To feel his tongue. She watched him speak, and tried not to stare at his mouth.

Shy questions and subtle teases outside the hut he occupied in Haven’s village. So new and so innocent. *You think I’m graceful?* The way her stomach flipped when he gave his answer; sly flirtation wrapped up in clever compliments. His eyes dropped to her lips. Just for a fraction of an instant, but she noticed it nonetheless. It left her dizzy when she walked away. That night she had laid in her darkened room, feeling entirely too warm, and her thoughts wandered to salacious places.

Kissing him in the Fade. The way he stilled in surprise when her lips touched his, and the brief moment of fear that followed when she thought she had ruined everything… before he caught her by the waist and slated his mouth against hers with such fierce passion that she thought it a wonder he had held it all back. Never had she felt a kiss like that before. It had left her breathless and aching when she woke.

The sly coquetry had been her undoing, and she loved to draw it out of him. A slow burn. A tease. Piece by piece, as he tried – and failed – to resist falling for her. She felt victorious and giddy when he had finally crumbled; embraced her fully. Told her that he had fallen in love, and kissed her soundly.

All this time.

*It would be kinder in the long run.*

A shaking hand tangled deep into her hair, the other still clutching the knot of sheets against her chest. Twisting it tighter around her breasts. She felt naked, vulnerable, and afraid; swimming with a thousand other feelings she had no words to describe. The weight of his confessions sat like a rock in her gut, heavy and foreign, and she felt she would be sick with it.

*But then you turned away. Why?*

*I had no choice.*

Somehow, she found her voice amidst the storm. Harsh and broken as it was.

"Show me."

His gaze lifted. A look of anguish twisted his features. "Please, *vhenan,* I—" he pleaded, taking a step toward her.

She took a step back.

"Show me!" she screamed. The words echoed in the room with a sharp, shrill edge that made him flinch. She sucked in a shaking breath. Then, quieter, said, "If you truly are—" The Dread Wolf. Lord of Tricksters. He Who Hunts Alone. Bringer of Nightmares. *Fen’Harel.* She could not bring herself to say the words. "—then show me." Their eyes locked. The silence stretched on between them. *"Please."*

Solas fisted his hands at his sides. A long moment passed where he did nothing save to look at her. Pleading, longing, his eyes searching hers in quiet desperation. He did not want to do as he was bid, she knew. But *she* needed it. She needed to understand. To bear witness to proof she could not deny.
And, somehow, she knew he had this power.

Finally, he shook his head – the motion so subtle that she almost missed it – not in refusal, but in defeat. He took a step forward into the room and she could not help but retreat another step back. Maintain the distance between them. Her heart pounded in her chest with such force she thought it would break free from its cage of her ribs. It hurt.

With throat tight and breath shallow, she watched him, and waited.

He closed his eyes and took in a deep, steadying breath. As he exhaled, the air around him seemed to ripple and warp. Another breath, and the tension fell away from his shoulders. Fists uncurling, hands now hanging loose at his sides. His fingers twitched. Something in the air shifted and it made the hair on the back of her neck prickle and stand. When Solas lifted his face and his eyes opened, they were no longer the gentle blue she knew. Instead, reflecting great flashes of bright, furious light unlike anything she had ever witnessed.

Before she had even a moment to wonder at the sight of such power, dark smoke began to pour from them. It curled out from the corners and swirled around his face, shoulders, chest, quickly covering the rest of his body. Magic churned around him. Powerful and ancient. She could feel it pulling at the veil – pulling at her skin – as it gathered, slowly enveloping him. Even as someone devoid of any magical talent, she could still sense the force of its power. The sheer magnitude of it was incredible. Almost stealing the breath from her lungs. Inwardly she wondered if he had always been capable of this. Had he held back the depths of his power all this time? To avoid suspicion? What else was he capable of?

The Anchor sparked.

She hissed as she grabbed at it with her opposite hand, rubbing a thumb curiously over the tear. The light in her palm pulsed and heated, and a strange pain shot out through her fingers. A tug, as though the energy in the Anchor was drawn to Solas’ spell. Magnetized to the tendrils of dark, grey smoke that were presently erupting from his fists and eyes.

Ancient magic to ancient magic, perhaps. He did say the orb was elvhen.

The smoke shifted around him until there was nothing left but a great, black cloud. Sparking and swirling furiously like a storm. Then all at once, the cocoon expanded. Bursting from all sides, instantly surging to massive proportions. Startled by the sudden growth, she took several panicked steps back, past her bed. She clutched at the post for support. Watching from a, presumably, safer distance as the cloud slowly began to dissipate. Melting, as though it had turned to water. Seeping into the floor.

And then it was over.

In the wake of the spell stood not a man, but a giant, black, wolf.

Easily three times the size of the beasts she knew. It stood much taller than Solas himself, even while seated on its haunches. A heavy coat of shining, black fur twitched and rolled in the breeze blowing in from the open balcony doors. It gathered in a thick ruff around its neck and chest. Great, rippling, muscles beneath its coat twitched as its back rose and fell with each breath. And thick, silver claws dug into the stone floor. Sharp as a dagger’s edge and nearly as long. Fangs protruded from blackened lips, giving the beast a terrifying presence even as it sat before her with its head lowered in submission. She could hear the sound of its breath rattling through its teeth. Each exhale punctuated by a deep and subtle rumble, not unlike a growl.
This was not the form of an animal that wandered forests, hunting rabbits with its brethren. This was a being of incredible and ancient power.

This was a *God*.

Slowly, it raised its head. Six piercing blue eyes, three on each side, blinked open in unison and trained their gaze upon her.

*The Dread Wolf.*

A hand darted to her mouth to catch the gasp that tore from her, but ultimately failed to muffle the sound. Panicked, she stumbled backward through her room until crashing against a table. The impact knocked an empty ceramic pitcher to the floor. It smashed on the ground at her feet and shattered. Broken pieces skittered across the flagstones in all directions. The wolf flinched, turning his head away.

Amidst her shock and disbelief, she almost laughed. What a notion! As though the breaking of a glass could startle such a beast.

*I have shed more blood in my lifetime than you can possibly imagine.*

The distance between them felt like miles. For all the secrets he had kept, it might well have been. The Wolf stood before her a stranger; a God from a forgotten and ancient time. Legend and myth. Yet somewhere beneath the visage was the man she had just taken to her bed. Touched, and kissed. A man so starved for love and affection that his body shuddered at a mere brush of her fingertips.

It was all she could do to stare, overwhelmed by awe and terror – trying in vain to steady her shaking hands and gasping breaths – as she looked upon the creature that represented her greatest love, and most terrible fear.

Minutes passed.

They stood a world apart in the darkened room. Silent, except for the wolf’s rattling breath. His shadow, long and ominous, cast by the light of the full moon, stretched across the floor. Reaching out toward her. Just one, single, step and she would truly be in the shadow of the Dread Wolf. When she cast her eyes about the room, she realized there was no way to move from the corner that she had backed herself into without passing through it. Though she had never been one for superstition, the realization struck her cold, and she found she could not will herself forward.

He made no move to approach her, to speak, or to offer anything at all. He simply sat with head bowed, turned away in shame and submission, awaiting her response.

Swallowing hard, she whispered, "Is—Are you still you? Under this?” Her dry, cracked throat was like a vice around the words. They pushed out in a gravelly rasp that she scarcely recognized.

His head lifted, eyes blinking. They glowed. A pale blue that was achingly familiar. “*Yes.*” The answer came out a mix of growl and voice, and he spoke it without moving his mouth. *Lips?* Within it, she could clearly hear the familiar lilt of Solas’ voice. The sound pulled at her heart.

In spite of her fear, she felt drawn to him. Curious.

Cautiously, she took a step forward – into his shadow – carefully avoiding the spray of broken glass. Six pale eyes watched her as she crept toward him. Slow and silent on pointed toe. Upon her approach, he lowered his head beneath the line of his shoulders to draw himself down to her level. She stopped mere inches away, staring into his face. Searching for familiarity; any piece of the
man she loved in this terrible form.

The Wolf’s brow was pulled into a tight, worried line. Watching her with piercing eyes that were little more than a gleaming blue, yet that ancient ache that haunted them was clear to see. The pain all too real. Large, pointed ears pressed flat against the sides of his head. Like a frightened dog cowering before its angry master. Strange that he would be so much more expressive in this form, she thought. Perhaps he could not hide his emotions as easily, as the Wolf.

Perhaps he did not want to.

This close, he did not seem as intimidating as he had been before.

Tentatively, she reached fingers out to touch his nose. It was cold, and moist. There was a sudden huff of hot breath against her hand. Startled, she flinched, drawing away. The Wolf blinked, paused, and then lowered his head a little further. Closed his eyes. An apology, she realized. Tense seconds passed as she struggled to slow her shallow breaths. She reached for him again. Slower this time. He was more careful with his breath now.

After a moment’s pause, a second hand joined the first.

Her fingers trembled as she delicately trailed them along his muzzle, up between his eyes, and then over the top of his head. Behind his ears where the fur was longer. Shaggier, but no less smooth. It felt like silk, and she found herself toying with it, drawing it neatly between her fingertips. It reminded her of Orlesian fabric and satin Antivan gowns. Fineries laced with gold trim.

It seemed strange that such a fearsome thing could be so fine to touch.

She dug deep into the heavy ruff at his neck, threading her fingers into the thick fur and feeling the heat of skin beneath. Then she gently took hold of his head and urged it to turn. He offered no resistance as she tilted it. Exploring him. Allowing her to do as she willed. Carefully, she felt along the tips of sharp teeth that extended past his lips. Ran her finger along his lower jaw. The bone he wore was considerably smaller than his own in this form; and she wondered, not for the first time, what its significance was.

Then she cupped his face with both hands, and angled his head downward. Pressed her forehead against his own, closed her eyes, and breathed.

A quiet, pitiful whine escaped him.

She almost laughed, again, when there came a quiet ‘thump’ of his tail. Almost cried.

With a pained frown, she whispered, “This… this was why.” A pause, to gather her thoughts. Choke back tears that pricked at her eyes. “All this time.”

It was not a question, and she did not expect an answer.

Why you resisted.

Why you tensed every time we kissed.

Why you left me.

Why you have always been afraid.

But his head lowered a little more, pressing firmly against her own. Ears pulled flat against his
Slowly, she brought up both her arms and encircled his neck. The motion loosed the knot of silken sheets at her breast. It unraveled, and the fabric fell. Pooled on the floor at her feet, leaving her standing naked –exposed and vulnerable – as they embraced. Uncaring, she nuzzled his neck, breathing in his strange, new scent. Now a mixture of the earthy, familiar smell of the Solas she knew and a heavy, electrical tinge of old magic from aeons long passed.

Her heart ached for all she had learned. It felt like a terrible dream.

A terrible, wonderful dream.

"Are you not afraid?" came the rumble of his voice.

She huffed. A sound half-way between a sob and a laugh. "Terrified."

"Your legends… They are not true. I am not the monster they have made of me."

"I know," she whispered. Feeling her eyes sting again.

There was a sudden rush of cold air against her skin that made her shiver. A bloom of black smoke surrounded them both. Swirling, and tearing. A pull of heavy magic, then a rushing wind against her ears. The Anchor sparked in her hand again.

Then it was all warmth and softness.

Solas’ arms wrapping around her body and pulling her close, a desperate press of her naked form against his own. The erratic beat of his heart hammering against her skin. He trembled. And she could not help but hold him tighter. Feel his body pressed against her own and make him into something real amidst the frantic, swirling sense of unreality. A sea of turmoil, confusion and fear threatened to pull her in and drown her. She sought safe harbour in the warmth of his body, the tenderness of his touch. The soft rise and fall of his chest. Shallow breaths and beating heart held her anchored to the world; changed as it was.

He whispered in to the crook of her neck. "Ir abelas, ma vhenan."

She nuzzled into him, and breathed.

Minutes passed in their needy embrace. Silent, if not the wind that whipped through the battlements below. His skin was warm where she touched, a barrier against the chill of the night air. And the longer they stayed that way, the more she found herself wanting to curl up in that heat and catch on fire. Amidst it all, she loved him. She could sooner tear her heart from her chest than deny what had blossomed there.

She closed her eyes, and reached for that feeling. The ties that bound them, that kept drawing them closer even as he had struggled to push her away. A truth neither could deny. Warmth and light within the storm.

Her fingers curled against his skin, upon his chest and at the back of his neck where her hands clutched him. A heavy breath made his body shudder, and his grip tightened around her back.

“What will you do?” he asked quietly. “Now that you know?”

She lifted her head from his chest to look at him. His face was drawn; worry etched into every line and crease of his features. A quiet vulnerability as he waited for her answer. With sudden clarity,
she realized he was putting his fate in her hands. He would leave, if she asked it of him. Either her or the Inquisition as a whole. In spite of his power, of his history, he remained loyal.

For all that she had learned, he was still just a man. That, perhaps, was the most difficult part of his truth to reconcile.

Elvhen and pretender-Gods. Wars and betrayal. Two thousand years of history turned on its head. And in the center of it all was the man she had fallen in love with. Still just a man, ready to leave if she so bid. Loyal, and in love.

She shook her head, answering, “Nothing.”

His surprise was obvious. “Nothing?” he repeated, his brow furrowing.

She laced her fingers around the back of his neck. Pulled him down, and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. At first, he stilled, uncertain. But then closed his eyes, and kissed her back. Gentle, and slow. When they parted, she brushed her lips against his own. “Nothing,” she affirmed. “Ar lath ma.”

And she kissed him again.

His relief and his need were evident in every burning touch of his hands on her body as she urged him toward the bed. When she wrapped her arms around his back, and pulled down on top of her.

“Ar lath ma,” he whispered against her neck. Brushed the words against her lips. Pressing fevered kisses along her skin as she guided him.

He moved with urgent need, still uncertain what he had done to deserve her mercy and terrified to lose it. She pressed her forehead to his, quieted his racing heart with slow kisses and soft words. Bid him to stop thinking, stop worrying, and lose himself in her warmth.

“Ar lath ma,” he said. Offered as a desperate prayer when their bodies joined, and moved together. Voice cracking with emotion; overcome with relief as they made love a second time in the tangle of her silken sheets. Bodies pressed so close and held so tight it could not be said where one ended and another began. Clawing, desperate, at hot skin slicked with sweat. Her face tucked into his neck, listening to his breath come ragged at her ear.

“Ar lath ma,” she called when she reached her end, arms wrapping around his shoulders when his body buckled over hers.

The sound of her name on his lips when he came.

He felt free.

He loved her.

He loved her.

And she still loved him.

As they lay in the afterglow, he felt weightless. Naked and shining, with her body wrapped around him and his chest filled with a bright warmth. It was a feeling he had never known, and he did not ever want to part with it. Free.

His fingers danced across her skin, pausing occasionally to play with a loose curl of her hair. Press a kiss to her temple. Simple, easy affections he had denied himself before that felt natural now.
For the first time, the weight on his shoulders felt a little lighter.

He did not realize how close he had drifted to sleep until her voice broke the silence.

"May I ask you something?" Her voice was low and husky from their lovemaking. A little sleepy. He hummed his reply, quietly urging her to continue. "What colour was your hair?"

He stilled.

Ellana raised her head to look at him curiously. There was a strange, small, quirk of a smile on his lips.

"Of all the questions you could ask now that you have the opportunity, that was truly the most pressing?"

She laughed, and he joined her. The sound bright and honest. It thrilled her to hear it. "It's something I've been curious about since I met you," she explained shyly.

With a soft chuckle, he answered, "Brown. It's a dark brown."

Her fingers found the top of his head and swept a line across it from ear to ear. Marveling at the softness. Always so smooth, never even the slightest hint of stubble. She imagined it was some spell that kept it that way. "Why have it like this?" she asked. "Is there a specific reason, or is it just your preference?"

A brow raised, eyes twinkling with mischief. "When I was a young man I kept it in great, thick braids that nearly reached my waist."

"Are you serious?"

Then he was laughing again. "Is that so difficult to believe?"

"Yes, actually. I cannot picture you any other way!" Ellana grinned. She reached up and ran her fingertips over his scalp again for emphasis. "So truly, why the change?"

Solas tilted his head. "Penance." At her frown, he continued. "In Elvhenan, significant import was placed upon the appearance of nobles and the upper castes. As Evanuris, we were gifted many fineries and lived in opulence. Our appearance was carefully crafted to reflect our position." The smile left his eyes then, and they became unfocused. Distant. His brows twitched. "There was a time when I lived that way as well," he admitted. A sigh and he shook his head. Chasing shadows. "When I began my rebellion, I cut it. Abandoned all of the fineries my position had awarded me. It was a symbol of my devotion to the cause, and it showed the People I had left that life behind. That we were equals."

Ellana regarded him thoughtfully. "I think I like you better this way."

He nodded. "As do I."

She lowered her head back down onto his chest. A finger traced the line of his collarbone, and he gave a contented sigh beneath her touch. There were a hundred questions she wished to ask; a thousand years of history she wanted to understand. But she hesitated, not wanting to push him too hard. Delve into memories too painful. A quiet moment passed as she considered how best to tread into territory that may be tender. Ultimately, she decided to just close her eyes and jump in.

"Did you have a family?"
He paused, taken aback by the rapid change of subject. "No, I did not."

"You never married? Bonded with anyone? Never been in love?"

The answer was immediate. "Not before you."

She laughed, lifting her head once more to fix him with an incredulous look. "As much as I appreciate the romantic sentiment, Solas, that's a little hard to believe."

An eyebrow lifted. "Regardless of your belief in it, it is true," he replied, clearly a bit rebuffed by her teasing.

Ellana frowned. "You've lived a long life. I assume you've had many lovers —" At that, he winced a little. A nearly imperceptible shift of his brow and a hard blink. A sore topic, clearly. She rephrased. "You haven't spent your whole life alone, I would assume. I suppose I just find it a bit impossible to think that you have not fallen in love in all that time."

He was quiet a moment, considering her question. Then, he lifted a hand to brush gently through her curls. "How did you feel when you were at Halamshiral?" he asked.

She balked. "What?"

"When you were at the Winter Palace," he urged. "How did you feel? The dress you wore cost the Inquisition a small fortune, and was an obvious show of your organization's wealth and power. More to the point, you were a vision in it." As he talked, his hand began to wander her body. A soft, intimate touch. She shivered. "The way it hugged your curves so delicately as you walked, giving only hints at what lay beneath. Your skin glittered." A finger traced across her shoulder, then dipped over the swell of her breasts. "The plunging neckline. The slit up your leg—" His hand smoothed over her rear and down her thigh. "—A seductive tease. You looked divine."

She grinned. "You were certainly paying attention."

"I was," he conceded. "And so was everyone else." A pause. "How did you feel?"

"A bit like an exotic, Elven plaything," she answered honestly.

He cocked his head to the side. "Was there no part of you that enjoyed the attention? Even a little?"

Images of coy smiles and playful flirtation flashed through her mind. A light, teasing touch to her arm. Solas' eyes on her from the far corner of the room as he toyed with the stem of his wineglass. The way she played by responding to the flirtatious advances of the more charming nobles, ensuring she stayed just barely within earshot, watching him out of the corner of her eye for any signs of jealousy or possessiveness. The feeling of victory when he hid behind a statue and pulled her in for an illicit kiss as she passed him by. The Game was not as hard to play as she had anticipated, and there were parts of her that had greatly enjoyed it. The power was intoxicating. Being admired was intoxicating. Before the evening devolved into little more than blood and murder, she had been the most interesting thing in the room.

All eyes were on her.

"Yes," she admitted after a time. "I suppose I did."

With a nod, Solas continued. "Now, imagine that you were not a visitor, but instead a permanent fixture of the Winter Palace. A star of grand Orleasian balls that went on for weeks without end. The halls filled with nobles and dignitaries all vying for your affections. Some merely want to
shower you in gifts in hopes of earning your favour, others may desire your ear for conversation, your presence at a negotiation—" He raised a brow. "— perhaps a chance to warm your bed. Imagine if sons and daughters were thrown at your feet in the hope you would choose to bestow your affections upon one, gaining their family power and influence when they used their position in your bed to their advantage. Imagine if sex held no taboo, nor intimate importance in your culture. If you were a lesser woman than you are today – a younger, selfish and lonely one – do you think you would have indulged in what was freely offered?"

She was beginning to understand where this was going. Quietly, she answered. "Yes, I think I would."

A sad smile pulled at his lips. "And amidst these indulgences, would you ever be able to trust that their affections were genuine? That a professed love affair wasn't just another attempt to bask in your power? Even if you found yourself infatuated with one – or two – do you think you would ever truly believe their feelings to be mutual?"

"No," Ellana whispered. A knot formed deep in her stomach.

Solas ran his fingers through a loc of her hair, and then tucked it gently behind her ear. Fingertips playing at the point. "Then believe me, vhenan, when I say I have not bonded with anyone before you." He took her hand in his and pressed a kiss to the back of it. In turn, she pulled herself closer, lifting her chin to give him a soft, lingering kiss.

It was not long after that the Fade found them both. A mess of tangled limbs, wandering hands, and love.

Chapter End Notes

In all the 'reveal' stories I've read, I never see anyone address the fact that it's gotta be a bit traumatic to be faced with the truth that your gods were literally Hitler. Even if you're not devout, that's an entire lifetime - an entire history - worth of religion that very literally defines your people that all goes up in smoke. That's intense. I wanted to touch on that, because I mean really.

Also thanks to geekyjez for finding out the answer to the Evanuris question that's been plaguing me since I started trying to write this chapter, literally a month ago now. Check out her writing, it's amazing and inspired me to actually publish mine.

Note1: Her fear of quickening him. Until told otherwise, any elf is going to believe the "official history" which is that Elvhen lost their immortality when they started hanging around shems. She's a "shem" to ancient elves, so I think this would be a legitimately frightening idea... and, in her mind, would put all of his attempts to keep her at arm's length in a rather terrifying context.

Note2: Vallaslin - to track and control. There's repeated mention of Fen'Harel "breaking the chains" of the slaves around the removal of vallaslin. I'm choosing to take this literally.

Note3: He does tell her everything-everything, just not now. The first few drafts of this chapter had everything-everything, but on second (or 25th, really) glance I thought that, considering the emotional impact on them both, it made more sense to get
through the first major confession. Pause for breath. Then save the second for a more contextual scene that will come in another chapter. I re-wrote this chapter at least ten times. Still not happy with it, but I need to keep going if I don't want to get stuck.

TRANSLATIONS:

Dirthai ma = Talk with me. "Dirth" is the base verb for 'talk', and 'i' is a modifier that effectively means 'to' or 'with', so I'm fudging the grammar a bit but I think it's accurate. In the Fade, the Nightmare says "Dirth ma" to Solas, which is harsh and direct = "Hear me!" rather than, "let's have a conversation and some tea".
Ar lath ma = I love you
Mythal'enaste lasa em = Grant me Mythal's blessing/protection.
Ir abelas, ma vhenan = I'm sorry, my heart

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

After so much angst, I wanted an opportunity to write some fluff and fun. Plus, I'd been wanting to explore some party banter. I figured these two deserve a bit of a break before delving back into it again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Varric grunted his displeasure as he clambered awkwardly down the stone steps that dotted the path from Skyhold.

He hated this path.

Easily a hundred times now he had traversed this blighted path to the fortress since their arrival from Haven, and the experience had never even remotely improved. It was always a pain in the ass, always a slog; not the least bit enjoyable. He imagined it was impossible for anyone to legitimately enjoy it. Though, on his right, Solas seemed contented enough with traveling. He was quiet, taking in the sights, and his features lacked their usual frown. Smoothed into a pleasantly contented expression as he gazed at the mountains in the distance. The apostate hardly counted, though. He was accustomed to wandering around on his own through mountains and forests for years at a time. For all Varric knew, he might even actually like taking long walks up slippery, broken stairs. Seemed like it might actually be his kind of thing.

But not Varric.

For one, the width and depth of the stairs was far better suited to the longer strides of Humans than to dwarves. Or even to elves, who were the ones that actually built the place, apparently. It was clear to him that the path was added to the location long after the fortress’ initial construction – likely by human hands, given the terrible state of it. No dwarf would ever craft stairs this shitty. Even blinded.

While sleeping.

In fact, the condition of the path was so poor that it required mounts to be led into the valley below rather than ridden. Which meant that the hardship of stumbling down the endless, crumbling, slippery, remains of the stairs was unavoidable.

There were nearly a thousand of these blighted steps and more than half were broken in one way or another. Some sections were missing entirely! Mix all of that with a near-permanent cover of ice and snow and you had a recipe for disaster that usually ended in – well, a sore end.

Ahead of him, Sera snickered when he slipped over a particularly awkward corner and made a rather undignified noise of surprise. He grumbled in response. "I hate these stairs."

"You hate everythin'," informed Sera.
"True," he admitted, "but not as much as I hate these stairs. Little dwarf legs and all." He wiggled two fingers back and forth.

She scoffed, calling over her shoulder at him. "Could always tie you to the pack horse!" She gestured with her chin toward the animal that Cole was leading at the front of the party.

The spirit blinked widened eyes. "I don't think he would like that," he said pointedly.

It was not entirely clear if he was referring to the horse, or to Varric.

As if on cue, the animal nickered and shook its head, prompting Cole to loosen the reigns wrapped around his wrist, and stroke its long neck affectionately. It was rare that Cole chose to ride on any of their journeys, regardless of how long it took or how difficult the terrain. Instead, he usually walked alongside the party, or simply disappeared to wherever it was he went. Reappearing only once they had made camp, or encountered trouble. In spite of his apparent aversion to riding, he was always eager to help care for the animals, and his phenomenal talent at keeping them calm and happy made him an asset.

The small moment of quiet was broken when Cole suddenly perked up, struck by an idea. "You could always carry him!" he suggested eagerly.

Sera snorted. "Ha! That ain't happening."

"Oh, but I was so looking forward to it," Varric replied with feigned disappointment.

Solas cut in from beside him. "Perhaps a walking stick would help, Master Tethras?" At Varric's curious look, he lifted the staff he was carrying and made a show of using it to balance his next step.

Varric hummed, tapping his chin. "You might be on to something, Chuckles. Maybe I can ask Harritt to find me a nice – though maybe non-magical – staff that I can carry around specifically for getting up and down these blighted stairs." The jibe won the barest hint of a smile from the apostate. High praise, coming from him.

"Needs to have a pretty rune," Sera teased. "And an inscription."

From the front of the line, Ellana piped up, "How about, 'I hate everything'?"

A chorus of laughter spread through the party. To Varric's amazement, the joke even earned a decidedly amused sound from Solas. Not quite a full laugh, but nearly. Close enough, anyway. The elf wasn't exactly easy to amuse, especially recently, making the response a particularly pleasant surprise.

Varric decided to hang back a step or two to observe this new development more closely in case it offered anything else to pique his interest. The instinct rewarded him a mere moment later when he spied the Inquisitor toss a glance over her shoulder that connected with Solas. They held each other's gaze for a few seconds before he smiled at her.

Actually smiled at her.

And not even one of those tiny little lip twitches he was usually only barely capable of producing. This was the kind of sincere, happy smile that nearly shows teeth. Makes your eyes crinkle at the corners. She returned it, albeit a little shyly, before returning her attention to the path ahead. Even more surprising: Solas' smile continued to hold even after the Inquisitor turned away. A look that slowly faded to a more subtle expression as his gaze drifted downward a little. He seemed to watch
her for a curious amount of time. Then, there was the smallest, subtle quirk of his brow – either amused or appreciative, Varric couldn’t quite guess – it was damned near impossible to tell with him.

*Wait,* a sudden realization hit him, *is he staring at her ass?*

He followed the elf’s gaze with no small amount of incredulity. Ahead of them by about 50 paces, Ellana was making her way down a section of steps that were in particularly bad shape. The remains scattered about in large, jagged pieces. This required someone with a smaller stride – like a female elf, for example – to move from one chunk to the next either by large jumps or small, nimble steps. Choosing the latter, she had turned herself to the side for better balance. A pose that then caused her movements to resemble more of a *sashay,* especially by comparison to the awkward stumbling about that Sera was managing just behind her. The back and forth sway of her body accentuated the flare of her hips, rocking them in *just such a way.* It could *almost* be a bit suggestive. That is, if one were so inclined to view it that way.

Discreetly, he turned his attention back to Solas and – *oh yeah* – he was very definitely staring at her ass. Still with that little tick of his brow, too.

*Well, I'll be a nug's uncle,* thought Varric, *didn't know you had it in you, Chuckles!*

He watched Solas out of the corner of his eye for a while longer, finding himself rather amused by the elf’s uncharacteristic leering. A moment later, perhaps sensing the weight of his stare, the Inquisitor threw another glance over her shoulder. In an instant, Solas had schooled his expression back to that neutral mask that Varric was far more accustomed to seeing from him, and his gaze lowered to the path at his feet. Good timing too, as he had just begun to make his way over the stretch of perilously broken steps he had watched Ellana move across.

*Well, parts* of her anyway.

*Interesting development,* thought Varric. At least they weren't screaming at each other anymore. That was a massive improvement. In fact, this was the first time in at least a month that they seemed to be capable of sharing space without making things awkward for everyone else. He reflected on the argument the elves had the evening before, and all those biting things they’d said to one another before finally moving somewhere less public. At least, he was reasonably certain the words were biting. Once they slipped into Elvish he thought it was a pretty safe bet they weren't exchanging pleasantries.

Regardless, they must have managed to successfully work through the worst of it at some point that evening and come to an understanding. Not only had Solas given up on his rather bizarre stance against joining the party, but his disposition was surprisingly pleasant. He was in a better mood than the dwarf had seen in over a month. Or *ever,* come to think of it. Moreover, he hadn't seen him look at the Inquisitor like that since—

The toe of Varric's boot slipped under the broken corner of a step and stuck hard. He slipped, and then stumbled. A fall was inevitable, and the sudden lurch of his body heaving forward tore a strangled cry from his throat. He tried to throw both his hands up to catch himself, but the result was more of a comical flail than anything else. Wincing, he sucked in a breath, closed his eyes, and prepared for impact. The tumble down a hundred broken, ice-slicked steps was *probably* not going to be the easiest ride.

Fortunately, he did not get the chance to find out.

In a bright flash of indigo, Solas fade-stepped to a point just below Varric and firmly held his staff
out sideways. A heartbeat later, Varric found himself doubled over it with a loud 'oof!' – winded, but uninjured. He grasped it with both hands, catching Solas’ concerned eye. The sudden commotion drew everyone's attention, and by the time he managed to right himself, all eyes were on him.

"Are you alright?" inquired Ellana from the front of the line.

Varric made a show of dusting himself off as he dislodged the toe of his boot from beneath the cracked step. "I'm good," he answered with a wave. "It's just my pride that's injured." He nodded at Solas, who was tucking his staff onto his back. "Thanks Chuckles, you saved my ass a bruising."

The elf nodded in return. "It was of no consequence."

"Should be paying more attention to the road," Varric quipped. He made no immediate move to resume their pace, instead busying himself with adjusting his jacket to stall a few extra seconds. Thankfully, Solas seemed to be following his lead, perhaps out of concern, and waited patiently for him to finish. They continued on their way only once Varric was certain he had managed to put enough space between them and Sera to be safely out of earshot. At which point, he added a sly, "Clearly I'm not as practiced as you are at dividing my focus."

Solas raised a brow. "I'm sorry?"

He smirked. "Nevermind." After a pause, he nudged Solas' elbow with his own, catching his attention. "So...?" he prompted.

Poised as always, Solas simply tilted his head. "Yes?"

"It seems... better?" tested Varric. He glanced ahead of them to ensure no one else was listening in. They weren't. Solas was looking at him expectantly, offering nothing and clearly waiting on him to elaborate. "You and the Inquisitor," he clarified. When he received no response beyond a series of blinks, he playfully nudged at Solas’ side, adding, "I mean, you two were going at it pretty hard last night!"

Solas was not exactly the most forthcoming person when it came to, well, virtually anything. Getting him to talk about himself or his personal affairs was about as likely as taking afternoon tea with Corypheus. No one even knew where he was from; let alone what kind of upbringing had granted him the privilege of cultivating the mannerisms of a nobleman. He carried himself like a Tevinter magister, but knew well enough when to play the 'humble elf' card. That said, Varric had never seen him truly cowed by anyone, nor did he expect to. He was a force to be reckoned with whether his opponent be demon or Chantry sister.

He often imagined that Solas would have a lot in common with the ancient elves, who were remembered as a proud and regal people. He also imagined that Solas would probably be flattered by that comparison, should he ever tell him.

Due to his experiences in the Fade and the breadth of knowledge that his personal studies had awarded him, Solas knew more about his ancestors than even the most esteemed university scholars did. However, he was loathe to share this knowledge with anyone but other elves. The smug superiority got a bit old – but he kept it reigned in well enough. Barring the occasions Varric had seen him and the Inquisitor go head to head over the Dalish, that is. It was one of the only times he had ever seen the man get well and truly rankled.

Getting an emotional response – any emotional response – out of Solas that he hadn't carefully and deliberately crafted was a challenge that many of their companions took upon themselves whenever
traveling with him. Irritation was one that Varric had managed to provoke from time to time, which
was always very rewarding. He had even seen the elf join in on some good-natured ribbing on
more than one occasion. That was even better! Though, outside of those few times, he’d never
known the man to be particularly… expressive. That was a big part of why that argument with the
Inquisitor the night before had been so unsettling; he honestly had not thought that Solas was
capable of that kind of embittered anger.

In probing him about the result of said argument, Varric honestly didn’t expect much beyond a
vague allusion to, well, some conclusion. Maybe, at the most, he might get an admission that things
had improved between the two of them. That they had reached an amicable agreement, perhaps.

The look of stark, absolute, horror that met him was the last thing he ever thought to see in
response.

Solas looked as though he had been physically struck by the words; his expression a strange mix of
deply offended and completely bewildered. It was actually rather funny. Or, it would be if Varric
had the faintest idea what had prompted such a reaction. Surely, Solas wasn’t operating under the
illusion that the two of them hadn’t been overheard during all that yelling? Maybe the outburst had
unsettled him just as deeply, and Varric had committed some sort of terrible faux pas by
mentioning it?

After a moment of frantic blustering, Solas all but yelled, "I beg your pardon!?"

Varric threw both his hands up, palms out. "Whoa, Solas!" he exclaimed with a nervous chuckle.
"I'm just saying! I could easily hear you two from the hallway! I mean, I think everyone out there
could."

The elf was staring at him, struck dumb in apparent shock. He blinked rapidly. "I—" he started,
then stopped, mouth silently working for a response. Something more than the strangled squeak
he'd managed.

To Varric’s great amusement, Solas seemed genuinely, completely, flustered. And the longer he
struggled for words, the more red crept into his cheeks and ears. The colour especially noticeable
considering how terribly pale he had gone a moment ago.

Varric narrowed his eyes. Is he... blushing?

That cinched it: this was definitely hilarious, regardless of whatever had prompted it.

Finally, Solas seemed to regain just enough of his composure to form a proper response. "I don't
see how that is any of your business, Varric!"

Now it was Varric's turn to be bewildered. "Really?" he snorted. "I mean, that may be true in spirit
but I'm pretty sure it was everyone's business for a while there! You two were loud enough for half
of Skyhold to bear witness."

The small, subtle expressions that played out over the elf’s face then were curious indeed. All at
once, he seemed to cycle through flashes of shock, anger, confusion before finally settling on a
look of palpable relief. A second later, it finally seemed to occur to him that they had both stopped
walking amidst their exchange. He resumed at a rather brisk pace that Varric struggled to keep up
with. His gaze fixed on the ground before him, carefully avoiding Varric's curious eye.

"The argument," he breathed, almost to himself. Then, to Varric, "Of course. My apologies." The
blush was retreating from his cheeks now. He had managed to recompose himself rather quickly,
schooling his expression back into that familiar, reserved mask.

"Yes, 'the argument'!" echoed Varric in a mocking tone. He laughed, long and loud, amused by the utter absurdity of the conversation thus far. "What else would I be talking about?" Solas did not answer, but his downturned gaze and furrowed brow gave the dwarf pause. "Wait..." his eyes narrowed. "What did you think I was talking about?"

Solas' gaze flickered to him briefly but stopped short of actual eye contact. A small crease in his brow was the only clue to what was going on underneath the mask, and while Varric was not as talented at reading Solas as Iron Bull was, it was clear to him that he was uncomfortable. This was especially obvious when he sidestepped Varric's question by answering a different one.

"It was terribly inappropriate to have argued so publicly; please accept my apologies for disturbing you, Master Tethras."

The sudden formality was not doing him any favours. He was overcompensating because he had been unsettled – embarrassed? – by something Varric had said. As far as he could tell, he hadn't been rude or insulting. At least, not intentionally anyway. All he'd said was...

It hit him like a rock.

Oh, shit.

Then, the sheer absurdity of it had him laughing aloud, earning a rather unnerved eye from Solas that flickered between him and their companions ahead. As though he was suddenly rather worried they would take notice of the conversation.

Unresolved sexual tension, indeed!

"Oh no. No, no, no!" Varric's bright, bubbling laughter was making it hard to speak coherently. This was too good, he thought. He took hold of Solas' elbow. The elf stilled, glancing again at their companions before warily meeting Varric's eye. "You're not getting out of this that easily!" He pointed a finger at Solas' chest, grinning wickedly. "You thought I was talking about sex, didn't you?"

Solas frowned deeply, shrugged out of Varric's grip, coughed, and continued walking. It did not escape his notice that the tips of his ears had turned a little red again. "This is terribly inappropriate, Varric."

But Varric persisted. He chased after the apostate, chuckling all the while. This was more than just good, this was amazing – he had him legitimately embarrassed.

"Andraste's tits, you did! Because you did! After you guys disappeared you went and had loud, angry, make-up sex!

The elf shot him a hard glare, but there was the smallest shade of panic in his eyes. "I did not say that."

"You didn't have to!" Varric snickered. "It's written all over your face! And I must say that red is a lovely colour on you, Chuckles." The exasperated noise he received in response was all the confirmation he needed. He quickened his pace until he was once again astride with the elf, whose rapid footsteps had slowed somewhat. Clearly an attempt to put a little more space between them and Sera, who was quietly humming to herself up ahead. He grinned. "So, does this mean you're back together? Or just 'together' I suppose, I'm not really sure what you two were before."
A long silence passed in which Solas seemed to consider his words very carefully. His gaze shifted from the ground, to the Inquisitor, briefly to Varric, before finding the ground again. Varric imagined he was trying to decide whether or not he could continue the charade or admit defeat.

It appeared he chose the latter.

"I am—" A defeated sigh and then, "I believe so." He thought another moment. "Yes."

Varric clapped him hard on the back, the force of it staggering him a bit. "Well, if that isn't the best news I've heard in a while! I'm happy for you both."

Solas leveled him with a glare, but there was no real heat to it this time. "I was unaware you held my personal affairs in such high esteem."

"Maybe not yours," Varric conceded playfully. "But definitely hers. Plus, the sexual tension you two have built up over the last year is enough to start pulling stragglers into your orbit." To his surprise, Solas gave him a look that he could almost call amused. It sent a rush of boldness through him. With a wicked grin, he teased, "You were pretty worried there for a moment that you'd been overheard. That good, huh?"

The amusement was gone.

"Varric," Solas warned.

"I mean a year of flirting is practically foreplay, right? I've ah, 'made up' after a bad argument a few times myself, but that fight you guys had was a doozy. Should I be impressed you can both still walk?"

"Fenedhis, Varric!"

"Alright, I'll stop! I'll stop!" he conceded, laughing.

After a moment's pause, Solas shifted awkwardly, and gave him a pained look. "I would appreciate your discretion on this matter."

His grin widened. "Which matter? That you're together or that you didn't do much sleeping last night?" Receiving only another glare in reply, "Both, then?" Varric chortled. He waved a hand. "Don't worry, Chuckles. No one will hear it from me. However, you may have already shot yourself in the foot with that one. Did you stay in her quarters all night or did you go back to yours after...?" he let the implication hang in the air.

Solas was quiet a moment, and then frowned. "Ah."

The dwarf lifted a brow. "The first one then?" Laughing, he teased, "Illicit affairs aren't really your forte, are they? You're supposed to sneak out under cover of darkness so no one suspects you were there."

"I shall endeavor to remember that next time," replied Solas dryly.

"Already planning the next time?"

He gave Varric another look, but the harsh edge was softened somewhat by a slight twitch of his lips.
It was mid-afternoon before the party reached the bottom of the mountain pass. There, the terrain was considerably smoother and the weather much warmer. It had been at least an hour since they had last seen any snow, and the breeze that blew through the area could almost be considered mild instead of biting. Josephine had gathered some reports on the weather from various Inquisition scouts and camps in the Hinterlands before they set off and had urged them to pack lightly. Late spring in Redcliffe was often warmer than one would expect for a waterfront town. The heat of the changing season was blessedly welcome; no one enjoyed camping in the winter.

They soon came to a shallow riverbed in the center of a valley. More stream than river at this time of year. Once summer hit the Frostbacks in full force, the meltwaters would transform it into a rushing torrent. One dangerous enough to route around, rather than traverse through. For now, though, the brook was only a few feet deep in the center, and the meandering flow made it both easy to cross, and a convenient pit stop.

“Alright!” called Varric as they arrived. “We can mount up here, and refill our waters.”

Leaving his shoes on the grass, he carefully traversed the rocks dotting the bottom of the riverbed. Finding a large one to balance on, he kneeled to dip his empty skin into the glacial stream. Moving with considerably more grace with their bared feet, Solas and the Inquisitor approached, crouching together on one of the rocks next to him. Ellana hissed a breath through clenched teeth as she plunged her waterskin into the icy depths, reeling against the shock of cold. Once it had filled, she jerked her hand back out in a quick movement, and then shook it aggressively. Out of the corner of his eye, Varric saw Solas discretely brush two fingers across her wrist. A brief surge of magic – presumably heat – bloomed beneath his fingertips and spread along her skin. She smiled.

The sudden smack of something leathery hitting the back of Varric’s head drew his attention from the scene. Apparently, Sera expected him to fill her waterskin as well. With a smirk, he did so; capping and tossing it back with a hard throw when he was done. It hit the center of her back with a satisfying thwack.

“Oi!” she yelled, whirling around to face him. Making an exaggerated display of rubbing the spot where it had hit. “Full water hits harder than an empty one, you tit!”

“Wasn’t me!” Varric feigned a look of shock and pointed at Solas, who offered nothing in response but an exasperated frown.

Chuckling, Ellana cut in. “If you’re both quite finished I think we can move on.” She gestured to the horses. Cole had led one out into the water, and the others had followed close behind. Seemingly unfazed by the temperature, the boy stood knee-deep with both his trousers and leather greaves soaked through. Murmuring quietly to one of the horses as it drank. It flicked its tail absently.

They had only the three mounts with them for this journey, rather than their usual four. Late spring meant it was whelping season, and Dennet had requested they take as few as possible so not to disturb those who remained. A task that was much easier to accomplish on a low-risk mission such as this one. The Inquisitor had agreed to three: two for riding and one for supplies, the latter able to carry an additional, single person only if necessary.

Sera had complained loudly, and frequently, about the prospect of sharing a saddle. However, she kept the grumbling to a minimum after Ellana threatened to seat her with Solas for the entire duration of the journey.
Varric prompted, “If you have a partner preference, call it out now!” With a knowing smile, he gave a wink to Solas. For his part, the elf offered no discernible reaction to the tease. Not even the reward of momentary – irritated – eye contact. Instead, busying himself with continuing to fill his and Ellana’s waterskins. Varric snorted.

Seras, on the other hand, was eager to jump at the opportunity. “Ooh, me!” she called, waving a hand. “I choose you, Varric.” Skipping over to the smaller of the two riding horses, she tied her satchel to the edge of the saddle and adjusted her bow for traveling.

The dwarf grinned as he joined her. “No love for your fellow people?”

Narrowing her eyes, Sera replied, “Droopy ears can bite it, and The Lady Inquisitits doesn’t tell good stories.”

“Fair enough,” chuckled Varric. Sera gave him an unceremonious shove onto the steed, and with a grunt, jumped on behind him. “Maybe I’ll tell you the one about the Qunari trader with the nug.”

“I actually don’t think I’ve heard that one.”

Behind the pair, Solas had finished gathering the waters and set to work ensuring everyone’s belongings were well secured to the packhorse before they set off. Cole lashed the mounts together, giving them each a soft stroke along their noses.

“Would you prefer to ride with the Inquisitor, Cole?” Solas asked him. The spirit shook his head distractedly, and then disappeared without another word.

With a raised brow, Ellana teased, “Volunteering me just like that?”

“I did not wish to impose,” he replied evenly, but the slight curl at the corner of his lips betrayed him. With a nod, he gestured to the horse, offering a hand to assist Ellana up. She took it readily. Though it was less for needing the help and more for the opportunity of an idle touch, however chaste.

The ploy did not escape his notice, and he was eager to take advantage of the moment. As he arranged himself behind her, his hands found her thighs. In a slow and very deliberate movement, he ran them up to her hips, easing forward, his fingertips just barely peeking under the edge of her leather armor as they slid across her stomach. There, his hands laced together, and with a sharp tug, he pulled her body backward until her backside pressed firmly against his hips.

Struggling to quell the sudden flush of her cheeks, she bit the inside of her lip, and smirked. Though, not everyone was quite as pleased with the arrangements. Once the horses started moving, Sera slammed up against Varric’s back with an audible clink of her silver buttons against his chainmail armour. Scrambling for a more comfortable position, she grumbled her displeasure. “Forgot how close you have to be.”

Varric pouted playfully, urging the horse into a trot. “Not into dwarves, Buttercup?”

“No the ones with beards,” she countered.

Thoughtfully, he replied. “Lots of lady dwarves have beards.” His tone betraying nothing.

The elf’s eyes widened. “You’re shitting me, now. That’s shit.” Turning in her seat, she glanced back at Ellana and Solas, her gaze flickering between them. “He’s shitting me, right?”
The apostate raised his brows, replying with a schooled, “Have you met many female dwarves, Sera?”

She balked. Varric nudged her playfully with an elbow. “You get used to it. Rubbing beards and all.” Behind him, Sera made a sound somewhere between a retch and a cough, drawing another bright laugh. “You could learn to love it!”


“I always thought elves didn’t grow any body hair?” probed Varric. His curiosity seemingly genuine in spite of the subject matter.

“Some!” she answered defensively. “Just not tons. Got to have something to set us apart from being a kid other than our tits, yeah? Not like humans get, though.” After a moment’s pause, she added under her breath, “Or dwarves, apparently.”

Behind them, Ellana groaned. “Must we talk about this in a party made up almost entirely of elves?”

They both ignored her.

“Is that why you’re bald, Chuckles? Can’t grow hair?”

A sigh. “No,” he answered simply.

“You mean you look like that on purpose?” Sera commented, sneering a little. She nudged Varric with an elbow. “Ten sovereigns says he’s a ginger.”

“Blonde,” suggested the dwarf slyly. “Suits him better.”

Without thinking, Ellana answered, “It’s dark brown.”

In the immediate hush that followed, she rather belatedly realized this was something she had no good reason to know about him.

With slow, calculated movement, Sera twisted in her seat. Her brow raised wickedly even before she turned around far enough to pin Ellana under a suspicious eye. A wolfish grin split her cheeks. Ellana bit the inside of her lip to curb the blush that threatened to spread into her face, pressing her mouth into a hard line. Trying her best to keep a neutral expression.

“And how would you know that, hey?” Sera drawled, rolling the words off her tongue like honey. Dripping with salacious implications. “Does the rug match the drapes?” Then she blinked, considering. “Or the windows.”

To her immense relief – and surprise – Solas came to her rescue.

“I do have eyebrows, Sera,” he remarked dryly.

Sera’s eyes flicked briefly to his forehead, where Solas lifted a brow by example, and she furrowed her own in return. Pondering. After a moment of quiet deliberation, she slowly turned back. Apparently satisfied with his answer.

Only then did Ellana let out the breath she’d been holding, whispering a quiet, “Thank you.”
Once assured that their companions were both facing away, Solas leaned in close enough to brush his lips against the edge of her ear. Almost a kiss. Then, she felt his teeth graze along the point. Almost a bite. It sent a shiver down her spine, raising gooseflesh along her arms. His breath was warm on her skin as he murmured, “Don’t go telling all my secrets.”

*Two can play at that game.*

In retaliation, she arced her back, canting her rear end into his groin. His hands were on her hips in an instant, stilling her with a firm grasp, and pushing a space between their bodies. She pursed her lips tightly to hide her triumphant grin.

If Varric had caught anything from the exchange, he did not show it. Continuing his teasing unabated. “So does this mean you can grow a glorious, *dark brown*, elven beard, Chuckles? That might be fun.”

Solas narrowed his eyes. “No,” he said again. It appeared to be the most he was willing to put into the conversation.

When it was clear he was not about to elaborate, “Elves can’t grow beards,” Ellana supplied. Varric made a disappointed sound. “Pity. I would have enjoyed that.”

“Bleh,” spit Sera. “Smooth is better.” She gave a girlish giggle, the sound trailing off into a light sigh. Then a frustrated groan. “Ugh. I need a tumble.”

A huff. “I know what you mean, kid”

“Don’t get any bright ideas, yeah?”

“I would never dream of it, Buttercup,” teased Varric. “Besides, you’re far too tall.”

“Tall can be nice. *Real* nice.” She giggled again. “Like those Qunari ladies.”

“Ah!” He waved a hand. “Too much horn.”

Her nose wrinkled, a cheeky grin curling her lips. She teased, “Not into *horny* ladies?”

He laughed. “I never said that!”

Ellana rolled her eyes, sighed, and pulled at the reigns of her mount to slow its pace. The hope being that it might put a little more space between Solas, her, and the increasingly lewd conversation ahead of them. Unfortunately, the act only served to draw more attention to them.

“What was that?” asked Sera, her tone light and teasing. Their horse had somehow let up on its pace as well, allowing the two to trot astride again. “Offending your delicate *Inquisitit* sensibilities? Making you *uncomfy*?” A brow raised as she turned around once again. “Or excited, maybe? Been too long on your end, too?” Shooting Ellana a cheeky grin, she wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. “So what’ll it be, then? *Horny ladies*, or *horny men*?”

Ellana narrowed her eyes, but her shy smile betrayed her, and the glare was far less intimidating than she had hoped. “I’m not having this conversation.”

“Both then?” A second later, Sera frowned, her eyes lifting above Ellana’s head. Brows knitting into an almost childish-looking scowl. Presumably, directed at Solas. “No one asked you, Droopy, keep your glare to yourself! *You* only get hot and bothered for the Fade. Probably only ever banged
away up in there. Very stiffly. With a stick up your arse. And a pinky finger in the air. *In total silence.*

A wholly unexpected and *very loud* bark of laughter burst from Ellana’s chest. Her body doubling over from the force of it. The hilarity went on far longer than was entirely appropriate, but she found she could not stop once it had begun. And while initially a bit shocked by the sudden outburst, Sera eventually joined in.

“She knows what I mean!” she commented, snickering. “You’d make a terrible lover.”

The giggles finally subsiding, Ellana allowed herself a cheeky grin. “I don’t know…” she drawled. “Maybe under all that poise beats the heart of a *terribly passionate* one.” Her smile turned positively wicked at Sera’s disgusted expression. She could feel Solas’ eyes on her but did not dare turn around to meet his gaze, knowing she’d give far too much away if she did.

Though, the look Varric gave her then made her worry she already had.

A sudden pinch of pain on her side made her jump, very nearly crying out in alarm. Her hand flew to the site, only to find Solas’ fingers there. *He shocked me*, she realized. She turned her head to look at him, and while she did not meet her gaze, she could very clearly see the amused quirk of his brow. The pull at the corner of his mouth as he held back a smile. A slow, satisfied grin curled her lips as she turned back around.

His voice was barely above a whisper, and delightfully husky when he finally spoke.

“What did I say about my secrets?”

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That night, while staring up at the canvas ceiling of her tent, Ellana found her thoughts wandering to the elf sleeping in the one next to her. His watch was not for another few hours, and whenever they had traveled together in the past, he was always rather quick to seize any opportunity to rest. Sleep had always come easily to him.

She strained her ears, hoping to catch the soft sounds of his breath, but quickly abandoned the task once it became clear that Varric’s rhythmic snoring had drowned out everything else. Save for the occasional soft *flick* of Sera fletching by the fireside.

With a heavy sigh, she rolled onto her side and buried her head under her straw pillow, holding it in place with an arm. She had only *just* managed to adapt to sleeping alone after leaving her clan, and now she found the emptiness of her bedroll had her feeling restless and lonely once again. Though, this time, it was for entirely different reasons.

It had been years since she had felt the touch of a lover, and longer still since a touch had meant more than passing fancy. Solas touched her as though her body was spun of gold. Kissed her like a starving man brought before a feast. Made love to her with a searing passion she never thought to experience, even in her wildest fantasies.

It had awoken a deep well of desire within her that set her body buzzing and her mind wandering. Even just walking with him was becoming... *distracting*. She found herself starting to hope they would run into trouble just so she wouldn’t have to endure the insistent pull of her daydreams. Every time his eyes met hers, all she could think of was the way they had darkened with desire
when he watched her cry out his name. Seeing his hand grip his staff as he walked had her chewing on her lip remembering how those fingers had felt when they dug into her hips. The worst came when they set camp that evening and he broke a sweat while putting up the tents with Varric. The musky scent of him made a torturous heat flare in her chest. A heat that quickly settled between her thighs, and remained there still. It was all she could do to stop herself from crawling into his tent on hands and knees and set upon him like a rabid beast. Tear into him, taste him, ride him until she heard that wonderfully lilting voice of his begin to falter and crack when he came undone.

The thought alone was enough to set her blood pumping.

But, she was the Inquisitor, and he a humble apostate, by all appearances. Discretion was of the utmost importance when it came to avoiding scandal. It was difficult enough already to garner loyalty among the humans as a Dalish elf leading a Chantry-affiliated organization. A great deal of her support relied on maintaining the illusion of her religious significance. An image Josephine worked very hard to craft. And was necessary to maintain, whether she liked it or not. Knowledge that The Herald of Andraste and Maker’s Chosen had taken a lover could do serious damage to her reputation of ecclesiastic purity. Positively ruinous, if that lover was discovered to be an elven apostate.

The less who knew of their relationship, the better.

And there was no way to join him unnoticed, currently. Sera was on watch now. Then Varric, after that. Additionally, she suspected that Solas was not the type of person who would readily consent to having sex in the middle of a party camp on his turn, sleeping companions or no. A proposition would likely just result in a lecture about safety, and propriety. If she was terribly lucky, she might be able to sneak into his bedroll once they reached the Inquisition camps in the Hinterlands where soldiers already stood guard and the tents were set further apart.

Though, somehow, she doubted it.

Bitterly, she realized it was unlikely she could even attempt to relieve her growing frustration by her own hand due to the presence of so many sets of elven ears to notice her ragged breath and strangled cries. She was not sure whose ears would be worse, in terms of being overheard.

Although…

No, she chided herself, shutting down the fantasy before it took root, don’t torment yourself with that.

From outside her tent, she heard Cole’s quiet narration. Giving voice to her traitorous thoughts. “Tension. Taut, twisting, terrible. A trap, ready to spring. If only a Wolf would wander awake.”

Sera scoffed and then murmured something about ‘creepy gits’ under her breath, gratefully oblivious.

With a frustrated groan, Ellana rolled onto her stomach and twisted her legs together. Belatedly, she realized that perhaps it would have been better not to bring Solas along.

It was going to be a terribly long week.

Chapter End Notes
Hoping this wasn't too boring or silly, but I figured it shouldn't be 100% heartbreak. :)

http://www.tumblr.com/bdafic - For prompts and updates
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Some more fluff, fun, character development, and flirting. I ended up cutting this because it'd be too long and meandering otherwise. Some short fluff and smut coming next chapter before things get more serious again... hopefully much quicker, since it's mostly written already!

Thank you all for your amazing comments and kudos, I never thought anyone would even see this, let alone this many! <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Inquisitor could not leave Redcliffe soon enough.

Politics had never been her strong suit, and she imagined it was unlikely ever to be. With her Dalish roots, she had little experience with the bureaucratic nuance that was so often required to navigate the more delicate negotiations of trade, lands, and power. Nor, honestly, did she care to cultivate it. Every time she attended one of these meets, it was the same song and dance.

The players: over-dressed, over-stuffed nobles with too much money and not enough sense. The pandering: arguing where they could be agreeing. So completely dependent on playing out their absurd little charades – introductions, rules about when to offer meals, how to properly accept an offer to take a seat – that the whole thing would take ten times longer than it had any right to. Hours upon hours of wholly ridiculous, unnecessary, posturing.

Yet somehow, every blighted step in these political dances was absolutely mandatory!

One slip here, the wrong word there, and suddenly the whole thing would devolve into a shouting match between petulant children. All sense lost to the wind! The layers of finery and lies cast aside in an instant in favour of arguing over some imagined slight. She had no patience for it. Much of her time instead spent grinding her teeth and trying to resist the urge to hit something.

The noblemen and women positively oozed contempt, and made no effort to hide their distaste for the Inquisitor’s race, and the position she had acquired in “spite” of it. She entered every meet at an immediate disadvantage – forced to work twice as hard to earn half as much respect. Relying upon her cunning and wit, instead of power and money; something the nobles were all too eager to throw around, and responded better to.

Josephine had spent hours – months, if she was honest with herself – teaching Ellana the ways of The Game and all of its sophisticated machinations. How to talk in circles and lace your words with subtle threats and clever ploys. Strategies she had some background in already, having spent much of her life with her clan in and out of conflict with the humans that lived in Wycome; attempting to broker trade or tentative promises of peace. Being a particularly skilled archer in her clan, it was necessary for her to accompany her Keeper on many such meets; witness the interactions first hand, learn how to play that ‘game’. However, she came into her position as Inquisitor lacking the certain finesse required to navigate such situations from the perspective of someone in power rather
than someone persecuted.

That was where Josie’s lessons came into play.

And so, Ellana left for each meet with a mental list of who responded best to what kind of manipulation, whose name was worth mentioning in casual conversation, and who had secrets worth exploiting. Where her power scored an advantage and where it was a handicap. All the while holding her own cards close to her chest, never giving too much away. Allowing her opponents to believe they had the upper hand.

That part, at least, was never terribly difficult.

She was, after all, a mere knife-ear. Shem racism was easy to leverage, and she used it well. Playing on their misconceptions and low expectations just long enough to weave little traps that she could spring when they began to get lazy and overconfident – remind them who among them all had the most power at the end of the day.

And she never did tire of the wonderful look of shock and mortification some fat noble would give her when they realized they had been outplayed by an elf.

In some ways, it was an admittedly complicated and even admirable set of skills to hone – this style of manipulation. But in most, it was a chore. And she bore no love for it. Spending a day embroiled in the painfully tedious song and dance always left her with a pounding headache and a terrible craving for hard liquor. This evening was no different.

Gratefully, the worst had finally passed.

Deals were struck, arguments settled, and documents signed. It had gone so well, in fact, that she would not even need to spend the second night in the city as they had originally planned. Instead, the party could be on their way as early as the following morning. The prospect left her in far better spirits than she was usually in following these meets. In addition, overseeing and participating in half a dozen terribly boring trade negotiations had allowed The Inquisition to acquire another merchant for Skyhold, as well as a large shipment of ore for the smithy, and enough canvas and cloth to fill the latest requisition request for tents. A harsh winter with plenty of travel had left them lacking, and many of the soldiers were beginning to complain about having to share. Loudly and frequently.

When they arrived at the next Inquisition camp, she would send a raven to Leiliana and let her know of her success. For now though, she only had eyes for the tavern. And by some miracle it was still early enough in the evening for the hope of finding solace there.

Varric and Sera had suggested they stay in Redcliffe’s crowded and noisy inn for the night rather than camp outside the village as they usually did. And she strongly suspected this was for the opportunity to fit in some drinking at the Gull and Lantern. Not that she minded too terribly. At this point, she was more than eager for the reprieve. It had been far too long since she had been allowed an evening to unwind.

And wound up, she definitely was.

It wasn’t the trip that did it, per se. Their journey to Redcliffe had been largely uneventful, almost boring, as nary a bandit nor bear had crossed their path. Other than a brief encounter with a small, and very angry, herd of adolescent druffalo near the southern border of the Hinterlands, they had barely needed to bother with their weapons at all. On the last day of travel, Sera had even risked riding without her armor, making a bet with Varric that she wouldn’t need it by the time they
reached the village. She had won a fair bit of change for her arrogance, but not before receiving several lectures about safety and responsibility from Solas. Her taunting eventually pushing him to suggest she had no need of his barrier magic, either.

Fearing that he may make good on the threat, she *reluctantly* agreed not to repeat the exercise.

And while her companions’ bickering wasn’t exactly easy on the nerves, it wasn’t that which had her ire up either.

No, the *truly problematic* effect of the rather unremarkable journey was how often the opportunity arose to lose themselves in conversation and word games. Or, more to the point, *flirtation*.

On several occasions, Varric’s insistence on roping Sera and Cole into several rounds of “I Spy” had granted Ellana and Solas the opportunity to slow the pace of their horse without notice of their companions. Put just enough distance between them to manage a few minutes of relative privacy. Minutes too often filled with quiet teases and dangerous innuendo. Tightly wound tension fueled by the risk of discovery that somehow always managed to give way to fevered kisses and wandering hands. Ending with the whispered promise of another night spent together upon their return. An oath that began as coy titillation, but quickly became a necessary and reassuring mantra. The hot days, long nights, and momentary dalliances having left both considerably keyed up.

The sudden, unexpected rekindling of their relationship and its abrupt shift into something physical had brought with it a fierce longing for touch. For intimacy. From the most passionate lovemaking to the quiet, casual, affection of fingers brushed across a cheek. Drawing tender smiles meant only for a lover. They found themselves reaching for it far more often, and with more need, than they ever had previously. The single night – and following morning – spent together having done little to slake what had built over the previous year.

Additionally, the emotional weight Ellana carried as she struggled to come to terms with Solas’ confessions only served to complicate the feelings. Every time the world began spin off its axis, she found herself craving the warmth of his touch. The safety of his arms around her body to hold her in place. Hold her down. Remind her where reality lay. A heated kiss and firm grasp to lose herself in. To push away that strange, needling, discomfort that came with having your worldview turned so dramatically upside down.

In him, churned a torrid mix of relief, joy, and anxiety, as he grappled between his newfound passion and the fear that gripped him when he worried on how to tell her the rest of his truth. It propelled him to seek out as many stolen moments as he could possibly find. Lest he lose the opportunity for good.

The shifting of boundaries between them emboldened him in a way he had not felt since he was a young man. Taking far too much joy in finding opportunities to whisper and tease. Satisfaction, when a stolen kiss left her reeling and dizzied. Unsteady on her feet. He watched with a smug smile as she stumbled over her words and struggled to recompose herself, trying to clear the telling blush from her cheeks. He found a rather perverse pleasure in how readily she succumbed to his seduction. How easily he gained the upper hand in these brief dalliances, even as she attempted to wrest the power back by tempting him in return. Thus far, she had yet to bring him to his knees the way he had done to her. However, it was not for lack of want. Every night of their journey so far he had struggled to fall asleep alone in his tent, mind racing and body *aching* for the relief he could only find with hers. He simply had much more practice in both resisting temptation and concealing his weaknesses. With her, he had far too many. And it was frightfully easy to lose himself in the moment when he was so very much enjoying this game. It had been too long since he had played it,
and the thrill of secrecy made it as dangerous as it was intoxicating.

In this game, the last point had – unintentionally – been awarded to her. During a fleeting moment before she left to attend to her duties as Inquisitor, wherein he originally had thought to gain the upper hand. He offered to walk her to the meeting location as a curtesy, using the excuse of visiting the nearby shops to restock their dry rations for the journey back to Skyhold. As they walked, they made light conversation about the negotiations. A few questions about the nobles she was speaking with. A few suggestions about the foodstuffs that would be best to pack. The gleam in her eye that he noticed as they traveled told him she was becoming wise to his ruse. But he found it only encouraged him. When they passed an alley, and there was no one nearby to witness a sudden disappearance, he took her by the wrist and pulled her in. Pushed her against the side of a building, their bodies hidden behind a stack of crates, and kissed her fiercely. With her hands pinned to the wall at her sides, he kissed her jaw, her neck; grazed his teeth along the edge of one ear, down her throat, all the way to a bared shoulder. Working until he had her gasping. Writhing against the wall.

Then she upped the ante by grinding her hips against his own when he made the mistake of leaning a little too close in the heat of the moment. A wicked smile curled her lips when she felt the stirring of his arousal. The pleased groan he could not quite catch as his traitorous hips thrust against her in return, desperately seeking friction. She knew she had him then. He released her wrists, and they were lost to passion. Forgetting for a few moments that they were only barely hidden from passers-by. Struggling to stifle the soft moans and quiet whines that threatened to give them away.

It was the longest they had managed to steal away since they left Skyhold, and they were loath to end it.

When they finally parted, she left him leaning heavily against the alley wall with his face in his hands. Flushed from chest to ears and breathing hard. As he so often left her. Trying to recover from the momentary dalliance and recompose himself. Smiling, for how eager and greedy he had become in so short a time. Laughing, for how much he enjoyed it.

The encounter was still at the forefront of Ellana’s mind when she entered the Gull and Lantern, immediately spying her friends seated around a table at the far end of the darkened tavern. They had purposefully picked a protected corner to sit in, she noticed. Perhaps out of habit: for its defensibility in the event of a confrontation. Perhaps just for privacy. Either way, she was grateful. She had barely a moment to begin adjusting to the new environment – the dark, sunken, candle-lit room reeking of spilled beer and sweaty bodies – before Sera’s voice suddenly rose up above the din.

“Lady Inquisitits!” she drawled, far too loudly. The shrill edge of her voice nearly echoing off the walls. A few of the other patrons glanced up at the disturbance, watching Ellana’s entrance curiously, only to lose interest a moment later, once it was clear she had little to offer in the way of entertainment. A good thing, too, as she was in no mood to attract any more attention than she’d already earned that day. Simply existing as the Herald of Andraste tended to draw more ogles and stares than she was entirely comfortable with, and after a day like this one, all she wanted to do was slip into obscurity. At least for a few hours. And a crowded, stuffy tavern was the perfect opportunity. At this hour, most patrons were well into their cups. Washing away the grime and toil of a day’s work with a purse’s worth of ale and hard liquor. They had little care for her now.

As she approached the corner table, Sera announced, only slightly quieter, “You finally joined us!” Tongue just a little too thick around her words. The subtle slur betraying the valiant effort she was making to appear sober. She straightened her back, rolled her shoulders and attempted to school her
expression into something resembling casual disinterest as Ellana took a seat across from her.

It failed miserably.

Ignoring her, Varric lifted his tankard in greeting, smiling wide. He, at least, seemed to be faring much better. “We were hoping you’d arrive before we were finished for the night. The game just hasn’t been as fun without you.”

After offering a friendly smile to both she then glanced at Solas, who sat off to one side of the table. Close enough to be included in the group, yet far enough away to have clearly distanced himself from whatever it was they were up to. A bottle idled at his mouth, a slight curl to his lips as he nodded a greeting to her. The glass was near empty, but there were no others near him, indicating it was likely his first. Though the slightest hint of pink on the apples of his cheeks made her wonder.

He was always careful with his drink the few times she had ever seen him imbibe. Something she had previously attributed to an aversion to alcohol, but now understood on a more intimate level. He was deliberately over cautious. Never consuming enough to risk loosening his tongue. With how carefully he wove his words, it would be far too easy to let something slip, if pushed. And so he sipped slowly at his drinks.

Sera and Varric, however, had managed to accumulate more than half a dozen empty tankards and bottles on the table between them. That, and the rosy flush of Sera’s face, told her they had clearly been enjoying their free time before her arrival.

Turning her attention back to Varric, “What game?” she inquired. More than a mite suspicious. “Do I even want to know?”

He laughed, taking another long drag from his cup before answering. “Mm, it’s a good one. Buttercup’s idea. Think of it as a ‘getting to know you better’ exercise.”

In response, Sera lifted her own drink into the air, spilling some onto the table in her enthusiasm. “I have great ideas.”

Ellana didn’t notice a drink had been ordered for her until a full tankard was suddenly thrust into her empty hands. With a nod, she thanked the server and handed her a sovereign for her trouble. Then, waited patiently for Varric to elaborate. All he offered for her silence, however, was a sweeping gesture of encouragement toward the cup she had yet to drink from.

She rolled her eyes, and made a show of quaffing the drink. Once finished, she wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve, and then placed the cup back down upon the table with a heavy clunk.

Varric nodded, satisfied.

“So are you going to tell me the rules of this game, or do I have to guess?”

Across from her, Sera snorted, but it was Varric who supplied the explanation. “We’re telling secrets.” His eyebrows wiggled suggestively.

Her eyes flicked to Solas. His expression offering her nothing as he lifted his own drink to his mouth.

“And you roped him into this?” she probed, gesturing with her cup.

Solas swallowed. Scoffed. “Hardly,” he muttered into his bottle. “I am here because they insisted
upon my company. Not to play.”

“Ah,” she replied carefully. Narrowing her eyes.

It was not just the apples of his cheeks that were pink, she noted, but the very tips of his ears, too. His words were clear and concise, but spoken a bit more readily than was typical for him. It was possible he had imbibed enough to be slightly off his guard, at least. It was unlikely he would still be here at all otherwise.

It was then that she realized she’d been toying with her tankard while lost to thought. Idly stroking the rounded handle between her fingers. Solas’ eyes followed the movement. One brow slightly lifted. She bit the inside of her cheek to suppress a grin. Clearly, she was not the only one distracted by passing fancy. And he was not being near as subtle about it as he would if sober, she imagined.

That sent a little twist of a smile to her lips. It was so rare to see him in less than perfect form.

Sera broke into her reverie. “He’s no fun.” With a sloppy jerk of her cup, she added, “But you? You’re better. It’ll be your turn next!”

Ellana laughed, threading her fingers around the handle of her tankard. “I’m not even sure what that means at this point! You’ve yet to explain it to me.”

Varric chuckled and drained his cup. Nodding at a passing server to get him another almost immediately. “It’s a simple game,” he explained with a cheeky grin. “Someone supplies a truth about themselves, and everyone else drinks once if it’s also true for them.” When she offered nothing in reply but a curiously raised brow, he elaborated. “So, if I was to say, ‘I’ve served in the Inquisition’ and take a drink, everyone else has to because that’s also true for them. But, if I said, ‘I’m a dwarf’ and drink, nobody else does, because I’m the only dwarf here. Got it?”

“But it’s got to be more interesting than that shite!” Sera quickly added.

Slowly, Ellana nodded. Hiding a smile behind the rim of her cup, held against her lips. “I think so.”

Turning, she asked Sera, “And it’s my turn now? To tell a truth?”

“No! I have one more go!” answered the girl quickly. Then, clearing her throat, she leveled Ellana with a penetrating look and announced, “I have slept with women.” And as she drank, a bit too deeply, she peered over her cup. Eager for the answer.

Ellana rolled her eyes and took a sip.

“I knew it,” Sera slurred. A triumphant smile on her face. “You are a lady lover! That’s why you two never got ‘round to smashing bits when you were friendly, eh?” In emphasis, she thrust her now-empty cup in Solas’ direction. For his part, he offered no reaction.

A sigh. “No, that’s—” Ellana began rather curtly, but stopped. Cleared her throat, and rephrased. “I’m fine with either.”

Sera didn’t miss a beat, quipping, “So he’s just that ugly, then?” A slow, sly grin bloomed on her lips until she was all teeth and plump, flushed cheeks. A look so positively wicked it could not be said she wasn’t plotting something.

For that, The Herald regarded her suspiciously. Somehow, she got the distinct impression that Sera was – rather inelegantly – trying to probe her for the answer to a slightly different question. She’d been on this track for days now: ferreting out hints on her love life. It was becoming clear that she was – for whatever reason – trying to trick Ellana into revealing personal details she normally
would not.

While some of her inner circle may have suspected her and Solas’ flirtation had developed into an affair, it was never something either had confirmed. Most knew they were close, and had witnessed incidences of passing flirtation, but never anything further. They had been excruciatingly careful about privacy and appearances during the few, tenuous, months they were together. Before everything dissolved. And other than Dorian, who seemed to know everything about her personal life by osmosis, Ellana had not confided the truth of it to anyone.

Curiosity was expected, particularly once things became rather icy between the two of them, but no one had the gall to ask her outright. Though, it seemed unlikely that Sera was pulling at this particular thread for the gossip. Despite appearances, she generally didn’t engage in much… instead, she generally just acquired knowledge. With that in mind, it seemed unlikely she would want to know about the Inquisitor’s private life for any reason other than fodder for teasing. Or, perhaps to win a bet she had made with someone.

With a groan, Ellana wrest the conversation away from her sex life and back to the heart of the game. “I have slept with men,” she announced pointedly. Taking a long pull from her tankard. No one else drank. A huff. “That’s what I thought.”

Eyebrows went up, and there was a brief, awkward silence before Sera broke it with a rude noise. “Touchy, touchy! Fine, then. You go, Varric!”

“Hm,” the dwarf murmured, scratching his chin. “I have pick-pocketed someone.”

Everyone drank.

Sera gave a loud, frustrated moan. Banging her cup on the table and shouting, “Boring!” The word made its way across her tongue in stages, drawing out the vowels as if each where its own sentence. “Nobody wants to hear about your tragic past on the streets, yeah? Back to the exciting shite.”

Varric chuckled, holding up his hands in defeat. “Alright, alright, let me try that again.” With a dramatic flourish of one wrist and a wistful sigh, he lilting, “I have made love under the light of the moon, and a blanket of stars.”

He and Ellana both drank. As she put her cup down, Varric gave her an appraising look. “Really?”

“I’m Dalish,” she reminded him. “All we have is under the stars. Nobody has sex in the aravels. Our families sleep there.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but before he could get a single word in, Sera interrupted. “You mean you just wander off and find a nice patch of grass when the mood strikes you? Every time?”

Her nose wrinkled, eyes blinking unevenly. Looking as though she could not quite decide whether to be horrified or impressed by this knowledge.

Nodding, “Every time,” Ellana confirmed.

“Have you ever had sex in a bed?”

She laughed, spluttering a little on her drink. “Of course I have!”

Immediately, the girl’s eyes widened. She thrust a finger, accusing and unsteady, toward the Inquisitor’s chest. “A-ha!” she yelled. Loud enough to catch the attention of a few nearby patrons. She was positively jubilant, as though she had just won a great victory. “So you have been with
someone since becoming a Heraldry person! Only beds you’ve ever known were at Haven and Skyhold! Who—?

“Or inns,” supplied Solas dryly. The answer drew everyone’s attention, and all eyes turned to him. It was the first time he’d deigned to contribute to the conversation. Taking a sip from his drink, he continued, “Unless I am mistaken, the Dalish do use them from time to time.”

It was not entirely true, and she imagined that Solas knew that perfectly well. The Dalish almost never stayed at inns, preferring to keep out of shem cities as much as possible. In fact, she was certain she had never heard of anyone from clan Lavellan staying at any inn. And certainly never for that reason. But, “Yes,” she agreed. Casually. “They do.”

Solas had given her a set up just vague enough to encourage Sera to draw her own, incorrect, conclusion without requiring Ellana to outright lie. It was wickedly clever. Wryly, she realized this style of double-talk was something he was exceptionally skilled at.

Sera huffed, but ultimately conceded the point. Grumbling under her breath as she sipped at her ale. “Fine then, my turn, yeah?” She hummed as she considered her tankard. A moment of quiet passing before she finally decided on something that would allow her to drink deeply. “I know absolutely no elfy language!” she announced with pride. Then drained her cup completely, patting the bottom of it with the flat of her palm to ensure she got every drop before she slammed it down upon the table with enough force to shake it a little.

Varric gave a quiet hum of his own before taking a very small sip. When Ellana caught his eye and raised a curious brow, he smirked. “I think I might know one word. A bad one,” he clarified, inclining his chin toward Solas. “I’ve heard him say it a few times.”

“Fenedhis?” she inquired.

He pointed at her. “That’s the one. What’s it mean anyway?”

“It, ah, loses something in translation,” Ellana answered, keeping her tone even.

Sera snorted. Then, after a pause, gave the Inquisitor a look down her nose. “For a people so stuck up about retaining their elfy language, you sure don’t use much of it.”

Narrowing her eyes, Ellana replied, “It’s a dead language. We may not possess fluency anymore, but we try. What remains varies from clan to clan.”

From across the table, Varric eyed the two of them apprehensively. Then turned to Solas, who was watching the pair intently from over the edge of his cup. Quiet. Seemingly content to stay out of it. For once.

For a moment, neither said anything. Intent to stare at each other with steadily increasing ferocity.

Sensing they were dangerously close to a confrontation, Varric decided that someone should intervene. He coughed. And, with a practiced chuckle, leaned forward onto the table and flexed his fingers. Drawing their attention. “Well, what do you know?” he asked the Inquisitor. Grinning. “All the dirty words, I’m sure. Those always survive.”

The elves’ gaze held another moment before the tension around them finally dissolved, and Ellana turned to Varric. “Enough to pick out the gist of something spoken, but not enough to be conversational,” she answered. Then, with a little smile, “And the dirty words,” she conceded.
The grin widened. “Like?” At her incredulous look, he lifted his hands, palms up, and prompted, “Indulge me! I could always use more curses. And I don’t truly know any Elvish.”

She considered this. And, feigning an expression of deep thought, she tapped her chin. “Fenedhis, pala, etunash,” Ellana listed, counting on her fingers. “Ar’isalathe ma’ pala fra min’nivhellan.”

Across from her, in mid-drink, Solas choked.

The sudden, loud, sputter drew everyone’s attention. Staring in surprise as he struggled to catch his breath between pained coughs into his fist. Once he had recovered, and realizing that everyone was now staring at him expectantly, he supplied, “That is not a curse.” Voice still rasping from the fit.

Ellana frowned, confused. “No?” She cocked her head. With a shrug, she pondered aloud, “Perhaps the meaning has changed over time, then.”

The picture of innocence.

He met her eye. Catching the smallest twinkle of mischief there before she blinked it away. With her gaze still locked on his own, she took a long pull of her drink. Slowly drumming her fingers on the table. Just once.

The corner of Solas’ lips twitched upward as he shook the last remnants of spilled ale from his jacket.

She smiled.

Point number two.

It was near to midnight, and the tavern largely empty, when the party had finally imbibed enough to render the game unplayable. Or rather, render them unable to play it. Their corner table now covered in an array of empty tankards, bottles, and the odd puddle of spilled liquor. Their purses, and heads, considerably lighter for it.

It was not often that members of the Inquisition were granted the chance to spend an evening gathered for drink and merriment. And so were eager to seize the opportunity when it presented itself. Over-eager, if their level of intoxication was any indication. Normally, they would not risk delving quite so deep into their cups, but time spent in a village meant time spent protected. Inquisition coffers easily covered the luxury of a night or two at an inn. Warm beds in comfortable rooms, surrounded by high, sturdy, walls. Guards patrolling just outside. An assurance of safety that granted them a rare chance to relax; to not have to worry about who had the next watch and whether or not they should take their armour off to sleep that night, or keep their leathers laced up just in case. It was nice to let loose every once in a while.

…Some more than others.

“Do you need help?”

Ellana eyed Varric warily as he worked to hoist Sera out of her seat. An arm wrapped snug around her waist for support, forcing her to stand, though she wobbled on unsteady feet. She had been fading in and out for the last twenty minutes, at least. And for nearly double that, the party had
been struggling to convince her to retire to the room she and the Inquisitor were sharing on the
second floor. Unfortunately, Sera proved to be a belligerent drunk and the task was far more
challenging than it had any right to be.

Each time someone successfully managed to urge her out of the chair, she would immediately
launch into a loud and angry tirade about whether or not she was as drunk as she appeared. Insisting
that she remain, and they all continue the game. This, even after she had lost the ability to string a
single coherent sentence together. Her answers long ago having descended into a stream of
incomprehensible mumbling broken up by the odd peal of drunken laughter.

While she lay on top of the table, either snoring or quietly mumbling to herself, the remaining
three abandoned the game and drifted into casual conversation about their return trip.

Though not without the occasional lurid joke or shared “secret”, largely at Varric’s prompting.

It wasn’t until Sera had – rather miraculously – managed to down yet another half-bottle of mead
that the slurry of exhaustion and inebriation finally won out over her stubborn streak, and Varric
was able to convince her to accompany him to their rooms.

Presently, the dwarf shook his head. He regretted it immediately. Blinking unevenly as the world
spun a little. He coughed, and swallowed hard to drive back the wave of nausea that threatened
him. Slowly, he walked a lurching, unsteady path toward the stairs that led up to the rooms. All but
dragging Sera along with him. On the next step, her feet crossed and tangled together. They
tripped, careening off to one side. Solas made to stand and offer assistance to the pair, but Varric
managed to right himself before they hit the ground, and waved off the help.

“Nah, I’m good,” he said, his tongue catching on the words a little. A testament to his own level of
inebriation. “We’re good. We’ll make it.”

With a nod, Solas lowered himself back into his chair. A little too quickly. His hand flew out to
grasp the edge of the table for support, and he gave a hard blink.

Ellana raised a brow at the stumbling pair. “You’re sure you’re okay?” she pushed.

“Ask me again tomorrow and I’ll have a different answer!” Varric called over his shoulder.

Somehow, he managed to climb the first few steps of the staircase. Then, taking Sera’s hand in his,
he placed it on the banister and gave it a hard few pats. Encouraging her to take hold and brace
some of her weight on it instead of his head. Gratefully, she did so. And once he had cleared the
landing he gave a wave and a final, “Goodnight.”

Sera giggled, nuzzling her cheek against the top of Varric’s head as they walked. Lumbered.

“You’re short,” she slurred.

He snorted. “That I am.”

They disappeared up the stairs.

And, finally, Ellana was left alone with Solas.

At first, they said nothing. Seated around the edge of the table, coy and quiet, watching each other
expectantly. Eyes soft and cheeks flushed from drink. The tension was palpable, and they were
painfully aware of it. All pretense gone after days spent yearning for opportunities to be alone.
Though, now that they finally had one, any enjoyment to be had from the moment was somewhat
complicated by the choice of location. As sparsely populated as the tavern was at this hour, it was
still public enough to restrict them to heated glances and clever words.

After a long moment of silence, Solas took a generous pull from his bottle. “You should consider retiring as well,” he informed. “Best not suffer a hangover come tomorrow, if you can avoid it.” In emphasis, he gestured to a pitcher of water and some cups that a passing barmaid had placed upon the table some time ago. It was largely untouched.

Ellana snorted. “Too late for that, I imagine. Besides…” she purred before taking a long drink from her own bottle, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Now that I’ve got you alone, I can finally convince you to play.”

His brows went up. A hint of a smile tugging at his lips. “Oh?”

She grinned. “Yes. Though I think, in the interest of learning more—” She tapped the glass bottle with a nail thoughtfully, giving him a flirtatious smile. “—I’ll have to change the rules a bit. Ask you ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions, instead. You’ll take a drink if the answer is ‘yes’.”

A quiet chuckle shook his shoulders. Humming, he noted, “I’ve some years on you,” with a touch of playfulness in his tone. Long fingers drummed against the side of his bottle absently. “A long life leads to many experiences. Changing the rules thus would likely result in alcohol poisoning.”

Ellana couldn’t help but take note that, while he teased, he also wasn’t saying ‘no’. And her grin only widened. Resting her chin on folded hands, she challenged him. “Then I’ll just have to try and stump you, won’t I?”

Solas quieted. His gaze held hers. Slightly unfocused, on account of the tipsy flush of his cheeks. After a moment, he gave her a slight nod. “Alright,” he allowed, smiling. “Ask your questions.”

A rush of excitement surged in her chest, and she bit her lip. Uncertain if it was the prospect of peppering him with questions he may actually answer, or perhaps the alcohol, that had her so eager.

With a predatory look, she cajoled, “An easy one to start, since you’re so behind.” Gesturing to the three empty bottles he had placed in a neat line on the table before him. Paltry, by comparison to the five she had arranged in a more haphazard pattern. Or, was six now? Not including the half-drunk one in her hand. And the tankard of weak ale she’d had when she first sat down that was now on the floor somewhere by her feet. The longer the night wore on, the more difficult it was to keep an accurate count. Her lips twisted into a sly grin. “Did you ever lay in your bed at night and wish I was in it with you?”

He laughed. A full, rich sound that bubbled from him freely. Shoulders shaking, and cheeks flushing even deeper in his mirth. She could not help the way her smile widened at the display. “That,” he said breathlessly. “Is not a fair question.”

“And why not?”

There was the slightest pause before he answered her. Eyes glinting with mischief. “Because there is not enough alcohol in this establishment to answer it duly.”

With a smirk, she took a sip of her mead. “Sweet talker.” He chuckled again, making a point to take a deliberately long pull from his own bottle.

Yes.

Once finished, he regarded her curiously, tilting his head. “Is it my turn?”
The question took her off guard, and she stilled. Blinked. “You want to ask me something?” He nodded. “What could you possibly want to ask?” she wondered, incredulous. There was little about her he did not already know. Being a part of the Inquisition, and her inner circle, meant he was privy to nearly all of her personal history. Most of it became public knowledge once the story of the Herald of Andraste spread, anyway. And what little she had that constituted a “private” life centered around him.

Of course, there was her younger years, prior to coming to the Inquisition – but there was not much about her time spent with the Dalish that she imagined would interest him, given his opinion of her people.

He raised a brow, and pursed his lips. “To find out, I suppose you’ll have to grant me a turn,” Solas intoned. Fingers drumming against his bottle again.

She gave him an appraising look. Trying her best to school her expression into one of cautious concern, but in her state of inebriation, she only managed to narrow her eyes playfully. The look drew an amused chuckle from him. “Alright,” she allowed. Then leaned back in her chair and lifted her chin, a mirror of his posture.

He wasted no time in thought. The question already prepared. “Were you bonded to anyone, before you were sent to the conclave?”

The sudden bark of laughter that burst from her gave him a start. His brow furrowed. It was clearly not a reaction he was expecting. “Are you asking me if I have a *cuckold* back in my clan?” she blurted, amused.

A flush of red crept into his cheeks and neck, and he shifted in his seat. She grinned. He was ever so charming when flustered, and she thoroughly enjoyed the rare moments of it.

“That’s not quite what I meant,” he replied haltingly. Clearing his throat, he made a second attempt at the question. “I have heard the Dalish often favour arranged bonds. I had only wondered if you had endur—” he paused, and a brow twitched in thought. Carefully considering his words so not to offend her. A breath, and he continued, “If you had been *arranged* for someone prior to leaving for the conclave.”

Briefly, wickedly, she considered creating a fiction for him. Some grandiose, romantic tragedy the kind Varric would write. Just to see how far she could push before he realized she was teasing. Take advantage of his disdain. He knew well enough that she did not care for his opinions on the Dalish. They had never clashed over anything as often – or as hard – as they did over the subject of her people.

But in the end, the truth proved easier. Moreover, she was too drunk to try to construct a convincing tale.

And so, pointedly, she took a sip.

At this, Solas’ brows went up, chin tilting slightly to one side. A subtle, hopeful little movement. Inviting her to elaborate.

“I’m a little old for such traditions,” she explained. “And clan Lavellan didn’t honour them as faithfully as others did. But we hadn’t had a mage born in a while, and so if I remained unattached by my 30th winter Keeper Deshanna was going to have me bonded to a childhood friend – a mage – in the hopes of rectifying that. The idea being that we’d be more likely to have magic-using children. A kindness, all things considered.”
His reaction was not unexpected. “A kindness?” he repeated, unable to hide his distaste. The curl of his lip threatened a sneer. “To force you into a bonding with someone you had no romantic interest in?”

Dark eyes flashed as they trained on him. “To guide me into a mutually beneficial relationship with someone I already had a friendship with,” she corrected. Firmly but gently. “Rather than ship me off to another clan and deliver me to a stranger, as so many others might have. I can think of worse fates.” The warning in her words was clear: do not push. And she allowed a pause for the sentiment to sink in before she tactfully shifted the conversation away from the topic of her people’s customs. A brow lifted, appraising. And her eyes worked a trail down his body. With a soft hum, she concluded, “sharing my bed with the greatest adversary of my people, for instance.”

For a moment, he just looked stunned. The quick shift leaving him unsure whether she had intended the remark as barb or jest. But then, the tension left his shoulders, and his eyes made a similar pass over her. The corner of his lips pulled upward in a crooked smile.

“Indeed.”

Both drank.

Eager to continue, and grateful to be off the subject of her people’s culture, “Next question,” Ellana prompted, gesturing with her bottle. The motion a little too clumsy, causing her to splash a bit of mead upon the table. “Have you truly been wandering around Thedas for the last two thousand years? Exploring ruins? Harassing the Dalish?”

Shaking his head, he chuckled. “No. I slept.”

“Slept?”

“Uthenera.” A wistful note touched his voice as he explained. “I entered it shortly after the Fall, and awoke one year before the conclave. In sleep, I wandered the Fade. Watched empires rise and fall. Wars, the Blights, countless ages past.”

Ellana hummed thoughtfully, turning the answer over in her mind. She knew nothing of uthenera outside whispers and legends. Stories of ancients laid to rest half-alive and dreaming on stone beds, prepared and tended by ritual. Lips brushed with mixtures of tea, honey, and sweetened milk on each new moon to keep their bodies nourished while they wandered the Fade. Some never to return, their physical forms left to crumble into dust and return to the earth while their spirits sought the dreaming.

Somehow, she could not imagine the man sitting before her being cared for in that manner for millennia. By whom? And where? Were there more like him? Still asleep? Or had they already awakened long ago? Was he unique in being a former Evanuris, and so received a treatment others were denied? Did he have grand temples dedicated to his name somewhere that no one had yet found? Full of faithful priests and supplicants?

She trusted that he was telling the truth – the way he spoke since their first night, after he confessed, was markedly different from the vague, winding speech he normally used. Yet the stories he told seemed all the more remarkable, and bizarre, when framed by all she’d learned in these last few days.

There were a hundred, thousand, questions she wanted to ask now that she had the opportunity. Countless legends and myths to test. Stories to prompt. But the drink made her slow and fuzzy. And a long day spent embroiled in talks of mindless politics left her struggling to arrange her
thoughts in any vaguely coherent order.

And the way his lips were quirked at one corner was *terribly* distracting.

So, instead of pulling one of the many thoughtful, curious, and intelligent questions from the torrent, she wrinkled up her nose and asked, “The common tongue wasn’t spoken until rather recently in history, did you learn it while sleeping, as well? In the Fade?”

“Oh,” he said. Suddenly a bit sheepish. “No.”

When she offered nothing but curious silence in response, he sighed. Shifted a little in his chair. “As you’ve surmised, only Elvish was spoken in Elvhenan. While in the Fade, I could communicate to others by altering their perception of the language when necessary. Therefore, acquisition of the trade tongue was not a priority until I woke to a world where it was virtually the only language used. It did not take long for me to realize I would not blend in as easily while speaking a dead tongue.”

“As you do,” she quipped.

A small smile. He continued, “And so, I took it from a man in a tavern, in a small village. Near to where I woke.”

His choice of words gave her pause. A brow raised. “You… *took it*?” she repeated. Rolling the words over her tongue curiously, wondering at the implications of his careful phrasing.

“Yes. There are—” His lip twitched a little. The slightly sheepish look returning. “—*certain ways* to acquire language from fluent speakers. Spells, as it were.”

Suddenly, she was struck by the rather distinct impression that there was a *very specific act* a language acquisition spell would require.

Grinning, she teased, “I’m getting the idea this man may not have thought that’s what you were doing.”

Solas pursed his lips. “No,” he admitted, clearly trying to bite back a smile, and failing miserably at it. “I imagine he did not. However, in my defense, he was not terribly opposed. He was quite drunk at the time.”

And then she was giggling. A tipsy, bubbling titter that she tried – unsuccessfully – to muffle into the back of her hand. Cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling. His own laughter joined hers as he downed his mead, draining it to the last drop before adding the empty bottle to its kin in front of him. This addition notably crooked next to the otherwise even row.

It took several moments for the mirth to subside, and it was only once they had settled into a companionable quiet that Solas deigned to resume the game.

There was a notable shift in his demeanor before he began again. A tension in his brow and a depth to his gaze that seemed to bore into her; searching for what she might offer in reply beyond her words. “You have never spoken of your family, to my memory.” He spoke with great care – his quiet, cautious, manner giving her the impression he was not entirely confident broaching the subject. “Do they fare well in your absence?”

Pointedly, Ellana placed her bottle on the table before her, and folded her hands in her lap. The answer clearly communicated without having to speak a word aloud.
“My apologies,” offered Solas quickly, averting his eyes. “I would not want you to visit bad memories on my account.”

“It’s alright,” she replied, shrugging. “I do not have much of a family. I was a foundling.”

“You are an orphan?” He seemed genuinely surprised by this revelation.

The follow-up question was not part of the game, but in the interest of trying to keep the mood light, she took a deliberate sip of her drink just the same. Nodding. “My parents were killed by bandits. Humans. I was three or four at the time, too young to remember them, nor anything of their death. All I can recall is that someone put me in the bushes before the attack – told me to stay still and be very quiet. And so there I remained.

“A member of clan Lavellan discovered me before I starved to death. A hunter who was checking traps in the area. He brought me back to the clan, and they decided to take me in. Keeper Deshanna effectively raised me, though our relationship has always been more one of student and hahren, rather than anything remotely familial. Motherhood is not her strong suit.” Her eyes passed between him and the bottle in her hand. “So, to answer your question more succinctly: I have no family to ‘fare well’. I assume Keeper Deshanna is fine, though I cannot know for certain as she has not written since I was elevated to venerated leader of the shems.” Scoffing, she added under her breath, “I don’t think she took it well.”

A tense silence settled over them once she had finished her story. Solas had gone very still, watching her with a pained expression. Hands folded across his lap with his fingers loosely twined together. The topic was not one she was in a habit of discussing openly, and certainly not often, and so was left unprepared for the vulnerability that came after revealing something so intimate, and painful. Old as it was, the wound had yet to close.

She shifted in her chair, uncomfortable with his show of sympathy. It wasn’t something she was accustomed to receiving from anyone. Especially Solas. And so she averted her gaze and filled the silence by taking a long pull from her bottle. When she heard him take in a sharp breath, preparing to speak, she quickly cut him off. She had no interest in platitudes.

“And what of your family?”

Frowning, he closed his mouth, pressing his lips into a tight line. And immediately, she regret asking.

Of all the things she could have said, turning the question back onto him was probably the least tactful. It was not difficult to deduce that any family he may have once had were long dead – he’d implied as much himself – and she was loath to bring such darkness into the conversation.

But strangely, it wasn’t wistful sadness that she saw in his face. Instead, there was a small, worried, twitch in his brow. Tension pulling at his mouth. A shade of unease in his eyes. Then, just as quickly, his expression smoothed back into the usual mask. The shift was so subtle and quick she nearly missed it.

Curious.

He found the question unsettling. And he was, perhaps, a bit too tipsy to hide it as easily as he usually would.

The silence seemed to go on for an uncomfortably long time while he frowned at the table, deep in
thought. She’d very nearly resolved to change the subject and ask a different question before he finally caught her eye. He picked up one of the empty bottles in front of him and began turning it in his hands. An idle task to occupy nervous fingers. Then he cleared his throat. “It seems that is something we have in common,” he replied. The answer was careful. Deliberately vague. And she was left with the distinct impression that she needed to ask just the right question if she wanted a completely truthful answer.

After a pause, “You didn’t know your parents?” she tested.

The frown deepened. “No,” he said. “I did not.”

There was something odd about his manner, but it was not anything she could put her finger on just yet. And she was too drunk to be overly tactful. Clicking her tongue, she tested a joke. “Did you even have parents? Or did you just spring from the Fade fully formed?”

But when the ribbing did not draw the smile she expected, it gave her pause. She watched as he toyed with the bottle, drawing circles around the rim with his fingertips.

“Would it concern you, if I had?” came his cryptic reply.

“No,” she replied honestly. His eyes snapped to hers. Fingers stilling. “I think, out of all the things you’ve told me, the idea that you were never a little boy would be the least surprising.”

There, finally, came the barest flicker of a smile. Some of the tension falling away from his shoulders. A moment passed before he spoke again. “In Elvhenan, reproduction and birth was rather different than it is today,” he began. Cautiously. “There was, of course, the more traditional method between two individuals. Though even then, gestation was carefully planned and often took years to complete, if not decades.” He hesitated a moment. Shifted. “And then, there were spirits who took a body. Passing from the Dreaming into a permanent, physical form; one that lives and feels.”

“Like Cole?” prompted Ellana.

He nodded, but still did not meet her eye. His gaze fixed on the bottle as he turned it round and round in his hands. “Not unlike Cole, yes. The idea is similar. Many Elvhen began their lives as spirits of Purpose, Wisdom, Curiosity—”

The idea struck her suddenly. An answer so obvious she wondered how she had never put it together before, and the words tumbled from her lips before she’d truly had the thought to speak them aloud. “Or Pride.”

He went utterly still. A moment passed in tense silence. And then slowly, gradually, his fingers resumed their meandering path around the rim of his bottle, and he nodded once.

“Oh Pride,” he echoed. “Come adulthood, there was no discernible difference between those who chose a form over those who were given it. That said, only Elvhen-born experienced childhood, or had a family. The closest equivalent for spirit-born would be any other spirits, or Elvhen, who presided over their process of taking a body.”

Perhaps it was the drink, or simply the overload of information that had temporarily broken her ability to be skeptical, but somehow she found herself not at all shocked or surprised by this revelation. Though she imagined she probably should be.

“I can see why you and Cole get along so well,” she remarked.
For that, he gave her a fond smile, conceding. “We are not so far apart.” His eyes found hers again. “Nor are you and I. Spirits, demons, elves and elvhen are not as dissimilar as you might believe.”

“You are a treasure trove of wonder, Solas,” she said, grinning.

The smile turned coy. “I aim to please.”

“Speaking of pleasing…” she purred, taking the opening he’d unintentionally given her. “What kinds of wonderful experiences does someone new to a body get up to?”

He chuckled. “There is little you could ask in that regard that would stump me, if you are still looking to,” came his smooth reply. Tactfully avoiding her question.

Undeterred, she teased, “Women? Men? All at once? Erotic adventures both public and private?”

Solas smirked. “Now I believe you are less playing and more attempting to determine my past sexual proclivities,” he replied dryly.

She laughed, pressing a hand to her chest in mock offense. “I would never!” Eyeing him, she added, “Though, I have noticed you’re not drinking.”

He gave an exasperated sigh and, noting his own empty bottle, rose from his chair. The sudden movement causing it to scrape along the floor. Then, he reached across the table and gingerly plucked the half-full drink from Ellana’s hand and brought it to his lips. Took a sip. Then placed it down in the center of the table, and sank back into his chair.

She blinked, surprised. And before she could stop herself, blurted, “Truly?”

Solas narrowed his eyes, but the little smile on his lips was positively mischievous. “I, too, was once young.” His gaze lingered, assuaging her reaction. “This surprises you?”

A girlish giggle tumbled from her lips before she could stop it, and she pressed her fingers to her mouth to stifle any more. “Well, yes,” she admitted. Then with a grin, added, “You’re a bit of a prude, Solas.”

That got a proper response from him.

Both brows raised, and his eyes darkened. “It was not prudishness that gave me pause to lay with you. Nor lack of want.” The words were cool. Almost disquieting in his calm. But something about the way he held her gaze while he spoke told her he took the accusation as a challenge over insult.

Beneath the table, he crossed his ankles, shifting so he could lean back in the chair more comfortably. The movement caused a wrapped foot to briefly brush up against hers, and she jumped at the sudden contact. They had not touched each other since their kiss before her meeting. He stilled her with a hand pressed to her thigh, holding it there just a moment too long, and gave her a knowing look somewhere between smoulder and storm. A look that, for some damnable reason, sent a rush of warmth that prickled beneath her skin and settled in her belly. And then she was caught up of the dimple on his chin and the curve of his ears.

That inviting cleft in his lower lip that begged to be kissed.

She swallowed, suddenly aware of how tight her throat had become.

I have had too much drink, she decided – now feeling far too hot – and she twisted in her seat so she could shrug out of her jacket and hang it off the side. When she turned back, she found Solas
watching her with a lifted brow. Too smug for his own good, if he thought a simple touch to her thigh would be enough to undo her.

That did not count as a point in his favour.

With a smirk, “I think I would have enjoyed knowing you when you were younger,” she tested, draining the last from her bottle.

His reply was immediate. “No, you would not have.” The words came out a little more firmly than she’d expected, and there was a short pause before he continued. Softer. “I was a vain and cocky young man.” He tilted his head. “and there are advantages to age.”

“Like?”

“Patience,” he answered slowly. His eyes darkening. One word wrapped in a dozen unspoken promises of desire and dare, laid by careful tongue. His eyes found her lips, just briefly, and his own parted.

The prickle was more of a rush now; spreading through her hips and coiling between her thighs.

Far, far too much to drink.

Against her better judgement, she found herself discreetly glancing about the room. Checking for any curious onlookers. There were barely half a dozen customers left. Most of them were alone, either sitting at the bar or tucked into dark corners. Staring into their cups. Half-asleep, and likely far too drunk to notice whether there was anyone else in the room at all. Let alone anyone important.

Maybe, if she was discreet, she might be able to get away with a touch or two. A brush of her hand against his body, or even an illicit kiss. But when she made to move a little closer to him, she realized his fingers were still pressed against her thigh. A touch so soft and so still she had not noticed it at all.

Except…

He was still watching her with that curious look in his eye. Desire, clearly, but something else was lurking there as well.

She narrowed her eyes. “Solas,” she began. Wetting her lips with her tongue. “Are you…?”

…Doing something?

The tingling heat in her core suddenly spiked, a gasp catching in her throat when her body reflexively clenched in response. She looked at him with wide eyes as he very slowly, very deliberately – and without breaking eye contact – picked up the last bottle on the table that had any drink in it.

And took a sip.

Yes.

Ellana cast her eyes around the room again. A distinct blush rising in her cheeks. She coughed, shifted, and told herself she had no business getting so excited over such a small tease. “Is this because I called you a prude?” she whispered.
With a smirk, he took another sip.

“You do realize we’re in a tavern…” she let the implication hang in the air. *And in public.* Truthfully, she had no idea what exactly he was doing other than making her very flushed and very sensitive, and so was unclear of the extent of which he could command this magic.

Or, what exactly he had in mind to do with it.

Still, it seemed a dangerous proposition. Especially when he replied, “Then you shall have to endure.”

And *no,* she thought then, *she most definitely* had no business being this excited.

Beneath the table, his fingers traced a slow path up her thigh. Curving inward. And her legs parted in welcome. Breath growing shallow and quick as her heart pound against her ribs. When his fingers reached nearly high enough to brush the laces of her breeches, she swallowed hard. “You know,” she began, dark eyes locked on his. Noting the flush rising on his neck and ears. “There are other roo—”

“INQUISITITS!”

Sera’s shriek startled not just the two of them, but everyone else occupying the tavern. The girl hung off an upper railing, leaning into the room. Weaving unsteadily on her feet.

Several sharp curses floated up at the disturbance. Followed by angry, heated mumbling as drunken patrons mourned their spilled drinks and bumped knees from jumping in surprise. A few particularly furious individuals had turned an evil eye upon the Inquisitor. Silently willing her to leave, taking the obnoxious drunkard on the second floor with her, and allow them to finish their drinks in peace.

Though, ‘obnoxious’ was not the word Ellana favoured for Sera at that moment.

Through gritted teeth she called back, “Yes, Sera?”

“Come ‘ere! Too late to be down there, still!” the archer replied. *Loudly.* She made a clumsy, half-hearted attempt to descend the stairs, instead stumbling over the first two or three steps. Slipping. And then landing hard on her ass with her face pressed against one of the wooden slats in the railing. The position pulling a cheek up over her eye. “Let me take you to bed!” she yelled, then snorted with laughter, and began mumbling to herself quietly.

She was clearly still very drunk, half-asleep, and determined not to leave until she’d escorted the Inquisitor to bed with her. Valiant protector of drunken companions that she was, she saw it her duty to ensure the Herald did not end up passed out on a table. It wasn’t the first time she’d done something like this, after all. And now Ellana was regretting the decision to share a room with her.

She glanced at Solas, who had somehow managed to maintain his smirk in spite of the terribly timed interruption.

“All your cavalry awaits,” he said smoothly, gesturing with his hand. When she gave no reply but to level him with a seething glare, he added a quiet, “Patience.”

The other patrons were still staring, and Sera still giggling quietly to herself, and so Ellana was forced to admit defeat.

She shook her head and left the table, murmuring a terse “goodnight, Solas” as she ascended the
stairs. She gave Sera a firm kick as she passed by, both to ensure the girl followed her, and for the personal satisfaction.

Before exiting the room, she tossed a final, lingering look at Solas. He had already turned away, but she was pleased to see that, for all his poise and professed patience, the rapid twitch of the muscles in his jaw revealed just how frustrated he truly was.

And she supposed that counted as a point to both of them.

Chapter End Notes

TRANSLATIONS:
Fenedhis = A common curse, probably used as 'go fuck yourself', but half-canon translates to "wolf penis".
pala = fuck
etunash = shit
Ar’isalathe ma’pala fra min’nivhellan= I [sexual]need you fuck [me] on this table
hahren = elder/teacher

Did YOU know that "Solas" is the Elvish word for "Pride"? Because I went through most of the game without knowing that, and once I figured it out, already suspecting he was an ancient, I had a major "OH SHIT" moment where a lot of stuff made sense. Him being a spirit of Pride that took Elvhen form has so much evidence it's virtually canon at this point. Seriously, read up on that shit. It's nuts.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

My apologies for getting this up so late. Lots of personal life stuff really took the wind out of my sails. But it's done now - hooray! Many, many thanks to all the wonderful kudos and comments ya'll are leaving. I had no Earthly idea how far this would reach, and how much feedback I'd get, and wow... it really gives me life when I feel uninspired. Thank you!

Fun fact: the first half of this chapter was actually the first bit I ever wrote for this fic. I just kept adding things ahead of it to "make sure it made sense" and suddenly 50k words and 7 chapters.

Warning: the last half of this chapter is NSFW. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cole prodded at the campfire with a long stick. Turning a glowing log to stoke the flames back to life. The movement produced a spray of sparks, a flash that drew the gaze of a few pairs of eyes. Curiously watching just long enough to see the embers settle before returning to their tasks.

Varric was perched on a large, flat, boulder partially entombed by moss. His crossbow – Bianca – lay next to him, disassembled. The pieces arranged in tidy, even rows as he worked to clean away the debris accumulated by the day's battle.

Sera lay on her back upon a patch of thick grass by her tent. A foot bounced against the opposite knee, following the lilt of a tune she hummed to herself. The same one she'd been singing since the party had left Skyhold; something she picked up from the bard at the Herald's Rest, and seemed moderately perturbed to be stuck on. She chewed a stalk of elfroot – something to settle her stomach after their unusually heavy meal – and idly picked at the loose threads of her fraying vest.

Solas and Ellana sat opposite each other, leaned against her tent and a felled tree, respectively. Legs stretched out before them, not quite close enough to touch. Each held a book: hers, a loose binding of blank parchment that she used to document the party's progress each day, and his a considerably larger, older tome. A collection of various theories about the nature of spirits of the Fade that he had ordered from a university in Orlais some months prior.

Cole sat close enough to the flames for it to be unsettling, seemingly entranced by the colourful, flickering dance. A cheek rest upon the top of his knees, pulled tight against his chest. His face hidden behind the familiar, wide-brimmed hat and a fringe of messy, blonde hair. He had said – and done – very little over the last few hours. His presence all but forgotten by the others in the comfortable quiet that had descended over the camp in the late hour.

It was well into the evening and the mood serene. A warm, lazy breeze carried upon it the scent of spring flowers blooming in the Hinterlands. A heady, sweet mix from the night blossoms that heralded the changing season. Even a day’s travel out of the plains, the smell was strong enough to linger. The lightly perfume on the air lent a sense of contentment that made setting camps in the area feel somehow safer. Comfortable. And it did much to improve a soured mood.
The party had finished the evening’s meal some hours earlier, the tankards, bowls and pots already cleaned and packed. Skins from the rabbit hunt were dressed and wrapped. And the remaining supplies organized for travel. Everything was ready and waiting by the horses; leaving only tents, bedrolls, and bodies to pack up the following day. Even breakfast – a few rations of dried meat and some fruit for each of them – was set out and ready to go. It would save them the time of prepping in the morning, as the party was eager for an early start – it would be the last day of their journey.

They had made excellent time on the return trip, only another six to eight hours on horseback lay ahead of them. And so they set the evening’s camp not far from the mouth of the mountain pass that led back to Skyhold. If, for no other reason, than to squeeze one more comfortably warm night out of the trip rather than cut a few hours off the last day by moving the camp into the pass itself.

It was late enough that, normally, some of them would have already turned in for the night (or at least drawn for first watch), but after the day's events no one was quite ready to sleep. Travel along the roads to Redcliffe was not exactly a bore, but as the trip there demonstrated, it very rarely offered much in the way of excitement beyond the occasional beast taken by surprise. Or, more rarely, the discovery of a crumbling ruin now overrun by fennecs and more rashvine than anyone could ever have need of.

The afternoon was of particular note when the group stumbled across a small encampment of rogues. When the party emerged from the underbrush and came upon the men, a moment passed wherein the two groups simply stared at each other in stunned silence. Struck dumb by their mutual surprise. In the end, it was only once Varric tried to speak to the men that they regained their wits, and attacked. The battle that ensued was surprisingly challenging, but won relatively quickly all the same. And, thankfully, without any serious injuries. Though the party was outnumbered, the bandits stood no chance against their team of well-trained archers, rogue, and one exceptionally skilled mage.

Following their victory, Varric, Cole, and Sera poured over the remains of the little camp, scavenging from it as much food, coin and weaponry as they could find a use for before Solas set the rest alight with a well-aimed fireball. This, to ensure no evidence of the struggle be left behind, just in case there were others nearby. Once finished, they all agreed to put some distance between the charred site and the evening's camp, which otherwise would have been set nearby. And since the bandits had been traveling along the main road, the party chose to veer off the usual path.

Map in hand, they aimed for an uncharted area of forest a few miles out, where a campfire would not be seen. After a time, they passed through what was once a small village, decades or perhaps even hundreds of years back. At one time, the area might have been home to a few dozen families – still too small to have been marked on any map. Not much had survived other than a few old, wood, frames now rotted through, and something that might have once been a stone anvil. The party picked through the meagre remains, finding little of value, and so kept going. Their curiosity rewarded by the discovery of a small grotto nearby. It was well protected – surrounded by a wall of trees and rock – making it an ideal location to settle in for the night.

Sera drew the short straw to go hunting for something to stew. It was a job she had somehow managed to avoid ever being tasked with before, and it quickly became apparent as to why. For all her skill as an archer and Red Jenny, the girl possessed very little experience in game hunting. More to the point, she was terrible at it. It was a wonder she had ever caught anything in her life with the raucous she caused. Her joyous whoops and angry cursing echoed through the area, sending any nearby wildlife fleeing in terror long before she ever had a chance to round them up. After listening to her try – and fail – to capture several small animals, Varric eventually took it upon himself to offer his assistance. Or, at the very least, convince her that moving quietly would work in her favour.
With Cole the only remaining companion in the camp alongside Ellana and Solas – and he occupied by the horses – they were gifted a brief moment of relative privacy. The pretense of conversation and playful flirtation had disappeared along with their patience, and so instead, they indulged those few moments locked in a passionate embrace pushed up against a nearby tree. What little time they had they enjoyed thoroughly, as they were unlikely to have another chance until long past nightfall – and then, only if one of them drew a watch that the other remained awake for. Still, it was a gamble. Thin canvas walls and the close quarters of a party camp offered little privacy. That said, the last two nights, Ellana had managed to sneak into Solas’ tent simply to share space with him.

She waited until her watch the first night, and Cole’s the next. Once stripped of her armor and down to civilian clothing, she crawled, silent, into his tent – noting with some amusement how readily he tossed aside his book upon seeing her enter. Normally, he was inclined to flirt a little – at least at first – but it seemed he’d abandoned that front in lieu of savoring every second they could spare. Unwise as it was, they lay together sharing slow, passionate, kisses until the heat became unbearable... and inevitably separated. Returning to their respective tents and duties. Lest they be overheard, or risk waking their companions. It was exquisite torment.

And it made the evening particularly wearing.

After battle had left them all high on adrenaline with hearts racing, the anticipation of *yet another night* spent in forced chastity was torturous. It was the primary reason that, while they chose to sit near each other, they were sure to put enough space between them to keep from physically touching.

*That,* and Ellana wasn’t entirely sure she trusted Solas with even the most chaste contact after whatever it was he did at the tavern once his inhibition was loosened by drink. Not that it had been unwelcome, of course. After knowing only his polite, reserved, approach to intimacy, seeing a playful and flirtatious side of him was a wonder. It was... *intriguing.* A side she enjoyed very, very much.

A side she found herself presently too distracted in thinking of to continue her journaling.

She had long since finished documenting anything of actual importance – down to a catalogue of the items they had pilfered from the bandits – but even that was proving difficult to complete. Soon, she found her eyes wandering. The soft scratch of her feathered quill against the paper slowing, and fading away.

Across from her, Solas leaned against an old, felled, tree. One hand resting on an upraised knee, holding his heavy tome. A familiar crease lined his brow – a look of deep concentration – eyes darting back and forth across the page. He seemed deeply absorbed, as he had been the last hour, and so she allowed herself the momentary indulgence of watching him out of the corner of her eye.

He was dressed in his familiar leg wraps, ragged breeches and a laced linen tunic – having removed the light armor he wore when they first set camp. The area was isolated, and showed no evidence of traffic, so the precaution of sleeping in leathers was unnecessary. A blessing, as the evening was unseasonably warm. Enough so that Solas had chosen to roll up his sleeves and loosen the ties around his collar before finding a place to sit. The low, open neckline fluttered in the breeze, lifting slightly, allowing Ellana a glimpse of bare skin beneath. From where she sat, she could *just* make out the sheen of perspiration on his freckled skin, glowing in the soft light of the fire.

The sight immediately conjured vivid memories of their night together. Hands sweeping across his chest, over flushed skin that heated under every touch. Feeling his heart pound as she took hold of
his shoulders. The beads of sweat that lined his crown as he moved against her in the final throes. Even as he succumbed to pleasure, he cradled her body as though it were a precious thing; as though every stroke of his hips were an act of worship. Her name a litany from his lips.

Absently, he drummed the fingers of his free hand against a thigh. The movement drawing her gaze. And suddenly, she was caught up in memories of their talents as well. Her eyes wandering a dangerous path.

The journal in her lap was truly a lost cause now.

There was no way to wrest her attention back to the task. Not when her mind flooded with memories of his breath on her ear, fingers in her hair, the utter ecstasy that was connection magic, the way he’d bitten her neck while lost to passion, and that incredible, desperate, sound he’d made when—

"You should probably stow the logbook for tonight, if you are feeling drowsy enough to have difficulty completing your work."

Solas’ voice broke through her reverie, giving her a start. His eyes remained fixed on his tome, the slightest hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his lips as he spoke.

She cleared her throat before replying, "I'm not drowsy" – and then inwardly, cursed. Only once she had answered aloud did she realize she had taken the bait.

His lips twitched again, more obvious this time. "Oh?" he said. His eyes lifted, peering over the edge of the book and meeting hers for the briefest second before lowering again. He turned a page. "It seemed you were having some difficulty focusing. I assumed it was exhaustion. My mistake."

Cool and even, his tone revealed no hint of the subtext with which he had laced the words. A warm flush crept into her cheeks, heated by the embarrassment of being caught leering.

Tease.

Fortunately, she was saved any further admonishment when Varric cut in with a loud, satisfied, sigh. He held a polished silver bolt up to the firelight, inspecting it with one eye closed. "Good as new," he announced. More to himself than to anyone else. "All clean again. Beautiful."

From the patch of high grass across the fire came a pointed scoff. "Your love affair with that crossbow is disgusting," said Sera.

The dwarf snorted a laugh, and then mimed petting the weapon, "Shush now. Bianca, don't listen to her, she's just jealous of us. What we have is special." He shot Sera a look of feigned offense, and she replied with a groan and two fingers.

The exchange awarded them a smile as Ellana tucked the quill into the bindings of her journal. Closing, and securing the cover with leather cording, she then placed it on the ground next to her. Ultimately deciding to take Solas’ advice, and give up on the writing for tonight. She stretched: arms raised high over her head as she pulled at her fingertips, pushing her chest out and rolling shoulders back. It granted her a series of satisfying cracks and pops, loosening the kinks that came with spending hours hunched over a book. A small, satisfied, groan slipped from her lips – and she did not miss the eye that Solas gave her upon hearing the sound, a brow raised as though to question its authenticity.

Her lips twitched. "Perhaps you're right, Solas," she cooed. And then, louder, "after all it was a rather interesting day, I'd say we all need a bit of extra rest. I may turn in soon."
His eyes held hers over the edge of his book, the air between them heavy with unspoken promise. One more day. Ultimately, she was forced to turn her attention to packing up, but the suggestion she had planted seemed to take root, and she spied a rather crooked smile curling his lips just before she turned away.

"Me too," added Varric, oblivious to their flirtation. "I'm exhausted. I did not expect to run into any trouble on this trip. This road is usually smooth sailing. I didn’t think this area had anything interesting enough to attract those types." While he spoke, he held up each one of the cleaned bolts for secondary inspection and, once satisfied, placed them in a row upon the rock next to him.

"It does not, to my knowledge," informed Solas. "Other than the remains of the village we passed. However, it was likely too small to hold much in the way of treasure. It is possible the group had chosen to make camp for the day as they passed through, much as we have, and had simply managed to avoid Inquisition outposts thus far."

"Was a bit fun though," added Sera, picking at her teeth. Always one to find the silver lining. She giggled then, patting the pouch at her waist. "I liked the part where we nicked their gold."

Varric chuckled. Now finished cleaning his weapon, he stowed the bolts in a leather quiver by his feet, and set to gathering the pieces of his crossbow for reassembly. "That was a nice bonus," he agreed. “Now I can afford to get a nice, big, bottle of dwarven ale at the Herald’s Rest once we get back into Skyhold. I’ve been killing for some since we left. Oh, and that flatbread that new woman in the kitchens makes. Human, with the red hair. Have you had that yet?"

Sera waved a hand dismissively. "Keep your bread," she scoffed. "All I want is my bed. A nice, big, comfortable bed. Lots of space. Lots of soft."

"Rushing blood. Pounding heart. Hunter and hunted." Cole broke into their banter. His eyes still locked on the fire.

Following the interruption, Sera gave a tittering, nervous laugh. "What? The bandits?" she asked, sounding more than a little unsettled. “Yeah, we hunted them good. Cold and dead now, so the blood’s not exactly rushing anymore.” With a scoff, she added, “Be pickin’ it out my hair for the next day unless we find a river." She unfolded one of her arms from behind her neck and flicked at a matted loc of hair for emphasis.

"Not dead. Not cold," the spirit pressed, his eyes widening, "Once faded, forgotten, but no longer. Reawakened, rejuvenated, reignited, renewed!" He took a breath. Heaved a deep, satisfied sigh and added, “It’s a different kind of freedom."

A long and rather awkward silence followed. Even Varric had paused to stare at the boy, utterly bewildered by his words. Solas frowned, eyes narrowing, but ultimately he said nothing. If he had any opinion on Cole’s insights, he kept it to himself.

It seemed an age had passed before someone finally spoke.

Sera blinked. Coughed. "Uhm," she managed, and then cleared her throat again. She eyed the spirit warily. "Right. Don't know if I'd describe it like that." Then she shivered – the movement exaggerated for theatrical effect. A moment later, the bouncing foot paused as a thought struck. She turned to face Cole. "Oy, wait, are you doing your weird shit again? That thing with the stuff? Fade stuff? Like the shit that happened here before us? Picking up on ghosty thoughts?" She indicated with a finger, drawing a loose circle in the air. Cole said nothing in reply, offering no sign he even heard her questions. After a moment, she turned away, giving a derisive huff and muttering, "Creepy shit, you are."
"I don't know, I don't always mind it," offered Varric in an attempt to ease the tension. He pulled a wooden brace of his crossbow into place with a satisfying clunk. "You get a bit more of a—" he paused, searching, "—intimate insight into a place. I mean the bits I can understand from him anyway. Maybe he’s picking up on the village. Small town, lots of interesting stories to tell, I’m sure."

Solas nodded thoughtfully. "I'm pleased you agree, Varric." He lowered his book to the ground, marked the page and closed it. "Certain locales – as well as the people who lived in them – have seen events in their history torrid enough to leave behind a deep imprint, to which Cole is particularly sensitive. His talents can, at times, reveal details that one could otherwise only lean by exploring the Fade in dreams."

"Sometimes thoughts are loud," agreed Cole, seeming to address the group rather than the fire this time. "Louder than memories. Loudest with a look, a breath. Words left unspoken."

Sera kicked a heel into the ground, giving Cole a rare start. "Ugh!" she yelled. "You two can swoon over Mister Crazyhat over here on your own time. Don't make a lick of sense to me! If I'm gonna be forced to listen to it all night, I'll need a stiff drink."

At that, Varric grinned. Volunteering, "I've got some in my pack, if you want it?"

In response, she held up a hand, beckoning with her fingers. A moment later, Varric tossed a leather skin of spirits over the flame. Sera caught it easily and took a long, audible, swig before replying. "Thanks, Varric. I'm gonna need all of this if it keeps this up all night." She motioned to Cole with the flask.

Solas turned to her, frowning. "Sera," he chided.

"What?"

He cast her a disapproving look, one she returned in kind as she took another long pull from the skin. They held each other’s gaze for a long moment, but ultimately, she gave in. Sighing, "Fine," she replied. Drawing the word out over her tongue like it was its own sentence. She rolled her eyes, looking all the petulant child made to issue a reluctant apology. "It. He. Whatever."

Cole cut in, seemingly oblivious to their exchange or the fact that it centered on him. "Ina'lan'ehn or evune, ma vhenan," he muttered quietly. "Words to make the heart beat faster."

Sera rolled her eyes and heaved another great, dramatic sigh. "Oh great, elfy shite and Fadey shite! My favourite! Just what I wanted." When Sera gave no reply but to wrinkle her nose in obvious disgust, he chuckled heartily.

"It means, ‘You are beautiful in the moonlight, my heart','" Ellana offered, glancing briefly at Solas. It was not something he had ever said to her, and so she knew the thought had not come from him, but she still felt shy speaking it aloud all the same. More so, after he turned a small, proud smile onto her – nodding once to indicate the translation was correct.

"Aw, not a romantic?" teased the dwarf, laughing. "I’m no expert but that sounded suspiciously like someone in love." When Sera gave no reply but to wrinkle her nose in obvious disgust, he chuckled heartily.

"It means, ‘You are beautiful in the moonlight, my heart'," Ellana offered, glancing briefly at Solas. It was not something he had ever said to her, and so she knew the thought had not come from him, but she still felt shy speaking it aloud all the same. More so, after he turned a small, proud smile onto her – nodding once to indicate the translation was correct.

Varric perked up. "Oh, maybe a passionate affair? An illicit tryst in the woods? Young lovers from the village, perhaps?" He made a wide, sweeping motion with an arm. "The kind of stuff good books are written about! Come on Cole, keep it up, I could use this for my next Swords and Shields
novel”.

Sera’s only reply was to mime violently retching.

Ellana laughed and shook her head. Having already announced the intention to turn in, she began her preparations. With a foot resting on opposite knee, she carefully unwound her leg wraps, commenting, “I think it’s sweet.” Once undone, she folded the fabric, knotted it, and placed it on the ground next to her.

"You would!" countered Sera. Sending a series of loud, exaggerated, kissing noises in her direction. "You Dalish are all into that whole elfy business, right? Probably gets you wet just hearing the Elvish at this point."

A shriek of laughter burst from her before she could even think stifle the sound. "Sera!" she chided through a fit of embarrassed giggles. Varric joined her, the sudden peal of laughter very nearly causing him to fumble his crossbow.

Solas was not as amused. He cast an icy glare at the archer. "Must you always be so crass?" he barked.

"Crass," Cole echoed. "The mind thinks what the mouth would never say."

No one paid him any mind.

Sera turned her nose up. "Only when it's funny. Which is all the time." Then she pursed her lips, and broke into a cheeky grin. Looking Solas up and down disdainfully. "Not like you'd ever recognize an opportunity. You probably never had a dirty thought in your life, Droopy".

He narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to retort, but was silenced by Cole's eager interruption. "Ar'da'laven, sil'ma, ar tel'matha. Isalathe ma'dun, ma'numin," he offered helpfully. The words would have gone by unnoticed by the rest of the party, had it not been for Solas' reaction to them. His head snapped toward the spirit, jaw slack, blatantly agog.

Sera followed his gaze, glancing between the two, and then pushed herself off the ground onto her elbows. She pointed an accusing finger at Solas. "Oy, that one was you, wasn't it? Now who's crass?!" She rounded on Cole. "What'd he call me?"

"Not for you. For her," replied the spirit, nodding at the Inquisitor.

All eyes turned to her at this revelation.

With her grasp of Elvish significantly poorer than Solas’, Ellana lacked the vocabulary to understand every word. It was only by the grace of his lessons on the subject that she now knew enough to muddle through, and eventually grasp the basic idea behind a phrase. And so, it took a moment for the meaning of what Cole had revealed to dawn on her.


Oh!

A surprised noise slipped from her lips, something like a choked gasp. And soon after, she felt the heat of a deep blush bloom upon her cheeks. Her gaze passed from Cole to Solas, who was watching her warily, clearly hoping she had not been able to translate the phrase. When their eyes
met, she could see a shade of panic there. The embarrassment he could not quite hide. It was enough to make them both avert their eyes.

The exchange had been quick, and subtle – but unfortunately, Sera caught it.

The awkward silence that had followed the spirit's admission was rent by her raucous, jeering laughter. "What was that? Oh, now this is grand!" She tittered with excitement.

Solas composed himself quickly, doing his best to ignore the taunt. His tone was firm, though the words caught in his throat as he spoke. Ears pink. "That is private, Cole."

The spirit looked hopelessly lost, glancing at each of his companions in turn, struggling to comprehend the confusing flurry of thought and emotion that flew at him from all directions. Solas, restrained and yet clearly nettled. Ellana staring at her feet, hands balled into white-knuckled fists. Varric, eyeing the elves with amusement. And Sera between them all, looking positively wicked.

She pressed Cole hungrily, giggling all the while. "What'd it mean?"

"You have never cared to bother with Elvish before, Sera," snapped Solas. "It is certainly not your concern now."

Ignoring him, Sera drew herself up onto her knees, clapping her palms together. She cast a wolfish grin at Ellana, practically salivating in excitement over the rare opportunity to see her blush. "You're red as a berry, you are! Must have been something right filthy." She affected a breathy, teasing tone, imitating Solas' cadence as she taunted, "I'll rut you on the desk so good it'll leave you walkin' bow-legged for a week."

Cole frowned, confused. "No, not a desk—"

"Cole!" The pair interrupted in unison, and then Ellana dissolved into an entirely inappropriate fit of nervous, girlish giggles. With her face buried in her hands, she did not catch the rather offended look Solas aimed at her.

Sera clutched her stomach and rolled backward, falling onto the ground as she let loose peals of hysterical laughter. Somehow managing to choke out, "I thought you two hated each other now, but I guess it didn't stick, hey? I just lost 30 sovereigns and I don't even care, your red faces is worth it!"

Across the campfire, Varric finally managed to catch his breath. He wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. "Okay, okay, I think that's good! Sera, I think you've had enough fun at their expense."

Solas shot him a hard glare, but said nothing. And the dwarf gave him a sly smile in return. "That said," he added a moment later. Unable to resist pushing the joke just a little further. "Dirty talk is not something I thought you had in you, Chuckles. I have no idea what any of that meant but it sure sounded lovely. Maybe I should be coming to you for ideas instead?"

Sera's laughter started anew at that. Gasping, she managed, "Even stuck-up elfies need to get it sometimes!" then collapsed with another fit of crowing glee.

That was the breaking point. Solas rose to his feet, cursing under his breath. "I think I shall retire for the night and leave you with your childish japes."

"Solas…" Ellana lifted her head from her hands to call to him as he passed, trying in vain to regain some of her composure. He gave her a look she could not quite read but said nothing in reply, brushing past her and heading toward his tent at the far end of the camp. He disappeared inside a second later, the flap falling into place behind him with a loud clap.
As soon as he was gone, she turned a glare upon Varric. "Was that really necessary?" she bit. Pouring as much anger as she could muster into the rebuke, and tamping down the urge to break into another fit of nervous, embarrassed giggles.

Varric held up his hands in defeat, bright laughter still bubbling up as he spoke, "I'm sorry, Inquisitor. I couldn't help myself! It's not every day I get a chance to ruffle his feathers like that." He gestured toward her. "Embarrassing you was just a bonus."

Ellana shook her head, sighing, and hid her face with her hands once more. "Gods and creators," she breathed.

"I did not mean to bother," offered Cole quietly. He looked just as lost as before. "I thought he wanted you to know."

Sera snorted. "Yeah he did."

Ignoring her, "It’s alright,” Ellana soothed, flashing him a sympathetic smile and trying to ignore the heat that crept into her ears again.

"Cole," said Varric patiently. He coughed, trying his best to clear the last of the mirth from his voice before continuing. "Pretty much anything of that, ah, subject matter is... best left expressed between those involved."

The spirit was quiet a moment. Ruminating on Varric’s advice. "I think I understand. Thank you."

Sera's howling finally slowed to a few gasping, breathy rasps that gave way to a long, satisfied sigh. After such a raucous display, the silence that followed was a welcome change. It did not last long, however, before she rounded on Cole again.

"But really though, what'd it mean?"

As it happened, Ellana drew first watch, and Cole the next. Though the spirit did not sleep, it felt both unfair and disrespectful to take advantage of the trait by tasking him with permanent watch duty. Even if he didn’t share the sentiment. Therefore, he drew straws for the job the same as everyone else. Spending time with the mounts, keeping company, or simply disappearing when it was not his turn. After Sera and Varric announced their intentions to turn in for the night, he wandered off in the direction of the horses and did not return. Somehow, he always managed to find some way to keep himself occupied, and yet still be available in an instant if trouble should strike. Whatever it was that had captured his attention remained a mystery – he did not generally inform anyone of his motivations and this instance was no different. Still, Ellana was grateful for the illusion of privacy just the same.

In fact, if she didn’t know better, she would have thought he felt sheepish for the embarrassment he’d caused earlier, and had offered her the time alone as apology.

But that would be rather presumptuous.

It took all of 15 minutes before the rhythmic droning of Sera and Varric’s snores had completely drowned out the crackling of the campfire. Following that, Ellana waited an extra five before deciding to politely forget about the evening’s embarrassment – or at least pretend to politely
forget – and find Solas in his tent.

It had been silent since he had entered – she had heard no shift nor sigh in at least an hour – and so took care to be quiet when she lifted the flap, and ducked inside. As expected, he was asleep. So quiet at rest that she could scarcely hear him breathe. A habit surely borne of spending so much time sleeping in dangerous places.

He was bare-chested, fingers loosely woven together across his middle, with a blanket of animal furs tucked around his waist. By the foot of the bedroll lay the tunic and leg-wraps he had been wearing, folded in a neat pile. Only his breeches remained on while he slept.

She studied him for any sign that he had awakened when she entered, but his eyes remained closed, and his breath slow and steady. It was clear he had been asleep for some time. With a sigh, she resolved to spend the hours of her watch next to him, if nothing else. Perhaps finish up her log. His nearness would assuage some of the loneliness she felt – though it would do little good for the tension.

But first, she granted herself a moment simply to gaze at him. To watch how his chest rose and fell with each breath. How his bared skin appeared almost luminous, bathed in the warm light of the campfire spilling through the threadbare walls of the tent, (one of many in need of replacing). Count the spray of freckles across his shoulders and collar, and wonder if they came naturally, or if it had taken wandering shirtless under a summer sun to amass them. Appreciate the way his long fingers twisted together and rest just below his navel. Covering the single, sparse, line of hair on his body.

The night they had spent entwined at Skyhold did not allow her this chance. No lazy, undisturbed morning awaited them. The few hours they’d had together at dawn were occupied by passion. They woke to birdsong, tangled together with Solas’ lips pressed against the back of her neck. One good morning kiss led to another, and another, until she had a leg hooked over his hip and his hand on the small of her back eased her into a slow, leisurely rhythm. Following their lovemaking, Solas dressed and returned to his room before the handmaiden arrived to wake the Inquisitor for the day.

Forgetting, for the moment, that discretion demanded he should have slipped away hours before. Thankfully, the early hour meant few were wandering the halls, and no one he passed drew any conclusion from his presence. Nor from the pink glow that lingered on the points of his ears.

They could not unabashedly bed together – not yet, and perhaps not ever – and that knowledge left her acutely aware of how deeply she wished for his presence in hers now that they had shared it. It wasn’t simply a matter of lust; she craved the little moments just as much. Falling asleep on his chest, waking with his arms wrapped around her. The feel of his breath against her skin. Or watching him sleep.

It was a deeply intimate act, to observe a lover at rest – quiet, peaceful, and vulnerable – and so she lingered.

Somehow, she found herself reaching out for him. And before she could think better of it she was drawing her fingers over a cheekbone. Across his jaw. Tracing a thumb over the pout of his bottom lip, and a fingertip down the bridge of his nose. Soon his eyelids fluttered, and he took in a sharp breath as he woke, exhaling with a soft hum as blinking eyes met hers. "Ma’vhenan," he greeted. Offering a warm, sleepy smile.

Ellana drew her fingers away, suddenly feeling rather self-conscious about her indulgence. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "I didn't mean to wake you."
Solas unfolded his hands from his stomach and reached out to take one of hers between them. "I do not mind." Bringing her wrist to his lips, he kissed it softly. The little intimacy drawing a shy smile. "I was not yet deeply asleep. I had intended to meditate, but it seems I drifted off."

They shared a brief, but comfortable, silence with their hands joined over Solas' chest before Ellana turned away to shed her armour. She kneeled next to his bedroll, worrying at the buttons along the side of her leathers, and awkwardly reaching behind her back for the lacings. Solas rolled onto one side, propping himself up on an elbow and extending a hand to help her. Then, thinking better of it, he paused. Asking, "May I?"

She nodded, shifting to give him better access. He sat up behind her, making quick work of the lacings and fastenings until both her pauldrons and vambraces could slip from her arms. As he pulled one free, the loose, linen chemise she wore beneath caught on an eyelet, pulled, and slid down her shoulder. She had neglected to wear a breastband, the job done well enough by her leather corset, and so when the smocked collar caught on the swell of her breast, it nearly bared it. Deft fingers paused their work as Solas took note of her near-exposure. Considering. Then, with the lightest touch of his fingertips, he traced a path over her skin: up her back, along her bared shoulder and down her arm. He caught the ribboned edge of the blouse between two fingers and very slowly began to pull it back up.

A soft kiss fell upon her neck, just beneath her ear, and another below that. A mothwing press of lips on sensitive skin, raising gooseflesh where they brushed. His free hand grasped her opposite shoulder, holding her steady, and her head lolled back. Inviting him closer still. Melting into the embrace.

Short, hot little breaths grazed her skin between kisses. What began as delicate and slow was becoming harder and more insistent as his lips trailed down her throat. Along her shoulder. All the while slowly drawing the edge of her blouse back up her arm. She could feel his heart pounding where his chest pressed against her back, betraying his calm facade. Exciting her with the knowledge that he was equally aroused. And when she felt the slightest touch of his teeth upon her skin, heavy sighs gave way to a wanton moan.

At that, he stilled.

Mouth hovering a hair's breadth over the junction of her neck, and fingers paused at the curve of her shoulder. Waiting. Thinking. Inwardly weighing the decision to continue against his better judgment.

Gods please, she thought, do not stop there. The mere possibility of more had her aching. She could feel her own pulse thrumming in her throat, in her stomach, in her core. So desperate for his touch that even the drag of his fingertips along her arm had left her weak and heady.

But then, he took in a slow, even, breath and exhaled with a soft hum – the slightest note of amusement in the sound – and left another kiss upon her neck. This one almost chaste by comparison. Then, he quickly tucked the chemise back into place at the dip of her shoulder.

"My apologies, vhenan," he whispered against her skin. His nose brushed her ear. "I could not resist." And with that, he pulled away. Giving a final, playful, tug of her corset laces. The sudden jerk against her diaphragm stealing a sharp gasp from her throat.

Ellana felt her cheeks warm, and she gave a quiet huff of laughter. It was all she could manage in reply, having temporarily lost the ability to speak. She tossed a glance over her shoulder, finding Solas once more propped up on an elbow, hands folded together on the bedroll. A little quirk of a smile on his lips. He watched with interest as she shed the last remnants of her armour, until clad
only in the loose chemise and a pair of breeches. She folded the leather pieces and stacked them in a neat pile, placing them by the entrance of the tent so they would be ready to take with her when she left it.

An idea struck her then – revenge for his tease – and with a mischievous smile, she turned around and crawled back toward him on all fours. The loose collar of the chemise hung low from her body as she moved, and with nothing beneath, it allowed Solas a generous view of her bared breasts. She watched, pleased, as his gaze slipped downward and lingered on the sight. Hastily meeting her eyes when she closed the distance.

She raised a brow, and offered a mocking, "Couldn't resist?"

He chuckled, a bit sheepishly. "Indeed," he admitted.

With a smile, she leaned in, brushing soft lips against his own. He lifted his chin, welcoming the kiss. It was a gentle, intimate thing at first – soft lips and warm breath. Yet it did not take long to become more. Parted lips gave way to breathy sighs. A quiet moan. The touch of his tongue and a soft suck of her lower lip that she returned eagerly.

Solas' hand drifted into her neck, twisting his fingers into the loose, messy braid. So neat and prim that morning when first she’d styled it, now little more than a gathering of frizzy fly-aways and escaped curls. She braced a hand against his raised shoulder and pushed. The kiss broke as they rolled; his hand grasped firmly around her waist to hold her close once their lips parted, then joined the other to wind deep into her hair. Quick, eager fingers soon found the ribbon that held the plaits together, and carefully pulled it free.

The silken tie fell away from thick twists of dark hair as they unravelled over her back in lazy twirls, settling into waves that framed her face and neck. Solas combed his fingers through the locs. Eyes following the flow of her unbound hair where it spilled over her shoulders and onto his chest. She closed her eyes, leaning into the touch – intimate and tender as he cradled her – but there was a hunger there, too. Palpable in the press of his fingers against her scalp, and the way he twisted and pulled the hair at the nape of her neck. Just a little. The sensation sent an electric tingle through her skin that granted him a soft hum of pleasure.

He did not idle there. Sliding his fingers free of the locs, he trailed his touch along the sensitive edge of her ears, across her jaw, before finally coming to rest upon her cheeks. Cupping her face with both hands. A thumb drew over her lips, coaxing them to part. A moment passed where he did naught but gaze at her, a look of deep longing upon his face. She watched him curiously, knowing too well what gave him pause and wondering how much longer he could fight against his own desire. Even having already laid with her, he faltered in this moment. A combination of old habits, she suspected, and lingering doubts.

Coquettish play and tease came easily; such moments were ephemeral, flights of fancy, with no promise of sex immediately following. But here, alone in the tent together, the air heavy with want and his heart beating a pounding rhythm against her breast, he hesitated to take what was offered. A lifetime spent embroiled in war, politics and guilt had hardened him to many things, but weakened him to love. He was forever fighting a battle with himself: against infatuation, falling for her, and then with lust. Careful – as much as he wanted to give in, to enjoy what they had. Always waiting for her to push him just a little – offer that small reassurance; a reminder that she was real. That what they had together was real.

It was not until the last shreds of self-control were stripped away that he embraced that need. Was lost to it. Love, like water to a parched mouth. The night in the library, when an impulsive kiss lit the flames, and at Skyhold, when their argument had left him too raw and exposed to keep pushing
Slowly, but surely, she was chasing the darkness away. Easing his doubts with gentle hands and soft lips. Patience and persistence to chip away the last remnants of the mask he’d worn for so much of his life that he feared going without. She could see it now, as she stared back at him, how it was slipping. The way his eyes, dark and heavy, lingered on her parted lips. It would take the smallest touch to undo him, she knew, but she wanted him to admit to himself – to her – how much he wanted in this moment.

And she knew she had him when the corner of his mouth lifted, and he shook his head. A battle won, and choice made. The excitement that fluttered in her chest coaxed from her an eager sound as Solas leaned in, only barely uttering a hushed, "Ina'lan'ehn ma," before his mouth crashed against hers. Untamed passion pouring into the kiss like a deluge.

Rough hands slid down her back and gripped her waist tightly. She writhed and rocked, a thigh pushing against his groin and earning her a pleasured moan and a stutter of his hips. The evidence of his arousal swelling against her. Each time she rolled her body against his, he responded in kind. Hips lifting to meet hers. Quiet, needy, sounds slipping from his lips between frantic kisses.

A choked moan caught in her throat when he ran his teeth along her bottom lip. Biting it, and pulling gently. Teasing. A little suck, another nip, and a flick of his tongue before diving in for a deeper kiss. Blunted nails dragged along her back. His need evident in the red trails he left on bared skin where he had pushed up her clothes. One palm ran down her spine and settled on her ass, gripping hard and pulling up as he tensed his leg; the angle ensuring his thigh would drag against her in the most wonderful way.

The sensation had her body buzzing in seconds. He swallowed her pleasured groan, muffling the sound so it would not carry beyond his tent. Though Solas tended to set his shelter at the furthest edge of their camp, it was far from isolated. Anything louder than quiet conversation would easily fall upon the ears of anyone who happened to wake. Elven ears, in particular. And it was clear that, even while lost to this moment, he had no want for them to be overheard or interrupted.

However, if he was looking to keep her silent, he was doing a terrible job of it.

Between his hand working to rock her against his thigh, and the subtle thrust of his hips against her leg – strained, halted movements as though he was fighting to keep still, but could not help but indulge the sensation – her body was set alight. Quiet little whines in the back her throat soon gave way to moans that pulled deep from her chest as the sensation built. Teasing. Fire burning in her core. The sound of his fevered panting between kisses, and the feel of his heart racing against her breast, only drove her further. If they continued this way for too much longer, as tightly wound as she was, staying quiet would become considerably more challenging. Yet still, she wanted more.

Slowly, carefully, she dragged a hand down his chest. Pausing to roll her thumb over a hardened nipple, and enjoy the way his body tightened in response, uttering a groan that made her stomach twist. Too reminiscent of the sounds that fell so easily from swollen lips when he reached his end. Sounds that had haunted her dreams (and several ill-advised incidences of fantasy) for the past week.

For someone so quiet and reserved, he was far more vocal a lover than she had expected – far more than she was accustomed to. Young Dalish quickly learned the value of silence, and speed, when it came to a lover’s tryst. A tumble outside the boundaries of the clan was best accomplished quietly and finished before anyone noticed you were gone. Solas was the first lover she’d had who was free with his praise. Pleasured moans and breathy sighs offered readily, unabashed, and she found she enjoyed it far more than she thought was possible. In particular, the way her name sounded as
it was torn, ragged, from his lips as he crested. Better still, how easily he coaxed the same sounds from her. After years spent making love in near silence, being brought to a pleasure that left her throat raw and head spinning felt like discovering a new world.

Presently, she bit her lip. Drawing careful fingers down his side, across his stomach — his muscles fluttering beneath her touch — finally coming to rest at the waistline of his breeches. There, she scratched a single nail back and forth along the hem, just above his groin, where his erection strained against the laces. And there she stayed, awaiting permission to go further.

It was clear enough that he wanted her. Badly.

Still, she was careful not to push him too hard... Despite the fervor in his kiss, she feared common sense would win out over passion. Beyond his usual doubts, he was holding on to something else. A sense of propriety, she gathered, or ego. Given their current locale. Perhaps just a test of self-control. Reservation, and resistance to temptation, were a matter of pride for him — though it seemed when it came to intimacy, his self-control was near non-existent, once tested.

She could feel the tension in his body. Hear it in the choked gasp he gave when she rolled her hip against him. Feel it in his hands as he toyed with the hem of her chemise. How his fingers edged beneath the waist of her breeches only to drag back out again, as though testing himself. So, she waited — for an encouraging word, a movement; for him to let go and give himself permission to enjoy this fully.

Though, if she was honest with herself, she would admit it took every ounce of restraint she had left not to just tear his breeches down his thighs and sheathe him then.

Instead, she teased. Her lips only barely brushing against his own. Withdrawing far enough to make him have to chase her. Capture her lip in his teeth, suck, tongue darting out to lick, only to have her draw just out of reach again. A few more times, and she could feel the prick of his nails digging into her skin. His frustration growing. The next tease of her lips drew a low growl from his throat — and, surprisingly, a subtle shake of his head.

"Ellana," he breathed. Her name sounded pained as it pushed from his lips in a whisper. "You—we should stop." A hard swallow. His voice wavering as he spoke. "W-we shouldn't. Not here. The others, they may... I do not think..." he trailed off. Whatever thought he'd intended to finish soon forgotten as his eyes slipped closed, lips parting to search for hers again. Unable to keep himself away. His hands roved her back, hips, and thighs, moving as though they'd a mind of their own. Probing beneath the thin layers of her clothes, seeking the warmth of her bared skin.

Whatever his mouth may claim, his hands told a different story.

She shifted, sliding her leg out of his grip so she could fully straddle his waist. Knees locked tight to his sides. With measured care, she sank down upon him, dragging a slow rock of her hips against the steeled press of his arousal. The groan he gave in response was almost too loud. Too much, as his hands jumped her back, hips and thighs, moving as though they'd a mind of their own. Probing beneath the thin layers of her clothes, seeking the warmth of her bared skin.

She leaned down, ensuring her lips would brush against the shell of his ear as she spoke. Voice low and full of promise. "Are you telling me you truly do not want to?" she challenged in a whisper, and pulled away just far enough to gauge his response to her taunt. He gazed back at her with eyes heavy-lidded and pupils blown wide. A flush of red colouring his face and chest.

He gave her a crooked smile. "A lack of desire," he rasped, words punctuated by another hard,
audible swallow, "is not the problem, I assure you. If anything, the issue is an excess of it that has allowed us to get into this—" She gave another slow rock, enjoying the way his breath caught in his throat before he managed to find his voice again. "—ah, position."

Lips trailed down his neck, tongue darting out to taste the sweat on his skin. He palmed her ass, fingers gliding around the backs of her thighs, inching ever closer. Again, she rocked against him, and again he thrust in return. This time throwing his head back, eyes squeezing shut as he choked out a moan that was definitely loud enough to carry past the tent this time. He seemed to realize this a second too late, cursing under his breath and biting his lip to stifle anything else that threatened to escape. Fortunately, it seemed they remained unheard – the chorus of snores across the camp continued unabated.

Against his throat, Ellana cooed a quiet, "Then why stop?" Rolling another pass over his groin.

"Because," he managed, "A party camp is not the – ah! – most appropriate place for intimacy.” Though he did not sound particularly convinced of this answer.

She laughed. Pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, his jaw, slowly making her way toward his mouth. "You honestly think we would be the first to make love in a camp?" she asked slyly.

"Because," he managed, "A party camp is not the – ah! – most appropriate place for intimacy.” Though he did not sound particularly convinced of this answer.

He chuckled, and shook his head. Gently, so not to interrupt the path of kisses she left along his face and neck. "I—no," he answered after a pause. Throat bobbing with another hard swallow. "I'm certain there have been many who took leave of their senses to indulge in carnality."

She grinned wickedly. "And would I be correct in assuming you've never had the pleasure?" she teased.

His eyes closed as her kisses neared his lips, now curled with a coy smile. "Do you believe me to be inexperienced with passion?" he replied, taking the bait. It was becoming a struggle to keep his voice steady, the gravelly rasp easily betraying any attempt he'd made to hide his state. It was a facade, and she knew it – and he knew that she knew – yet he persisted. Enjoying the game.

"Perhaps," she teased. Teeth dragged along the edge of his ear, nipping softly at the tip. He groaned, a sound both frustration and pleasure. She continued, unphased, "I'd imagine you've never taken leave of your senses." Her voice was low, breathy. The slightest hint of a moan slipped between teasing strokes of her tongue along the point of his ear. "Never allowed yourself to indulge in—" She punctuated the next word with a slow grind of her hips, "— carnality," and gave a salacious hum of pleasure as she rocked back and forth over his arousal. Ensuring he felt every little shift of her hips; the barely perceptible press of her swollen nub against his cock.

There was barely time to process the flurry of movement – both his arms wrapped around her back, a leg lifted her hips for leverage, a growl rumbled from deep in his throat – and suddenly they were rolling. Then she was on her back, gasping, the sound swallowed by his mouth as it crashed into hers. His kiss like fire; hot and greedy, feeding on anything she could offer it.

When they finally broke for breath, he was grinning. Looking positively wolfish as he stared down at her. One hand raked down her side and grasped her thigh, bracing it high against his hip, and then rocking against her. Angling his body so he would drag himself along her clit, teasing her much the way she’d done to him. She had to bite her lip to keep from crying out.
"Not," he whispered against her mouth, "In a very, very long time."

Oh, thank the Gods!

She laughed, in victory and relief, and circled her arms around his neck, capturing his mouth. The heavy press of his chest pinned her body to the ground, holding her in place as his hips worked a slow rhythm. Clothed though they were, the friction felt exquisite for bodies so tightly wound.

A hand slipped beneath her clothes to palm her breast. Kneading, and then pinching a tight nipple between two fingers. Eliciting a moan that rang in his ears, and sent his heart pounding. Wanting more. He grasped, frantic, at the hem of her chemise, pushing it up over her stomach. She arched off the bedroll to give him room, and in the next instant, he’d hooked his arms under her back and thrust them both upright. Mouths parting just long enough to draw the chemise up between them as he tore it off. Tossing it into some corner of the tent, instantly forgotten.

Once bared, he pulled her close – hard enough to steal her breath – crushing her breasts against his chest. Devouring her with hands and mouth. She took hold of the leather cord that held his pendant, wrapping it once around her hand, and then fell backward, pulling him down with her. They landed with a sharp grunt, sideways across the bedroll, though neither noticed nor cared. Too occupied by the task of pulling breeches down over hips. Ellana wriggled free of her own, giggling, as Solas struggled to do the same with his and still manage to keep kissing her.

And then it was nothing but naked skin. Flush with desire, and slick with sweat. Tangled limbs beneath a cover of fur blankets. Solas hooked her legs over his hips, pinning her body against the rumpled bedroll with his weight. The firm press of his arousal gliding easily along wet folds. Teasing. The slow, grinding, rhythm leaving her a writhing, mewling mess beneath him. Body coiled tight with want and achingly empty.

They were a flurry of frantic movement. Fingers delved into her hair, cradled her neck, and cupped her breasts. Her own grasping at his back and shoulders, pulling him closer when his lips began to wander down the column of her throat. Leaving sharp little bites that had her keening. Struggling to stifle eager cries into the back of her hand, now pressed firmly to her mouth.

She was on fire. Between the grind of his hips; the sound of his fast, heavy, breath at her ear; and the heat of his mouth working its way down her chest, her mind was a blur. Then his tongue began to trace the slope her breast, flicking a tightened nipple before he sucked the bud into his mouth, and she could take no more. The twist of heat in her core became a roaring flame. That delicious pool of tension between her legs beginning to spread through her body.

It took an incredible amount of effort to resist the urge to give in then and there. To surrender to sensation and ride the slow grind of his hips to a release she’d needed since they left Skyhold. A week of stolen moments and no outlet for her frustration had left her far too sensitive. Absurdly, she realized that was twice he’d been able to bring her close with little more than the rock of his body against hers. And while the thought of giving in was tempting – far, far too tempting – she was after more than just her own pleasure.

With thighs tight around his waist and ankles hooked together over his backside, she shifted beneath him. Angling her hips so he could slide between her thighs and push inside her. A silent plea for more.

But he did not take the invitation.

Instead, he pressed a palm against her waist to still her eager hips. Frustrated, she slipped a hand between their bodies, intent to guide him. But to her surprise, he broke the kiss. Deftly catching her
wrist just before she could take hold.

"Not yet," he chided. A note of promise in his voice that spoke of other plans.

However, she had grown too restless to wait. "I want you," Ellana plead. Straining against his grip. Eager to touch. To stroke. And in spite of his efforts to restrain her, she soon found her target. Fingertips trailed over velvet skin, up and down the underside of his shaft. It was a small rebellion. One that left her satisfied when his hold on her wrist began to slacken.

"Ellana," he groaned, the word pushed through clenched teeth. "Vhenan."

Undeterred, she repeated, "I want you."

She took her time. Circling his length with the softest brush of her fingertips, exploring, marveling at how easily he succumbed to touch. Clearly, she was not the only one left weak and wanting. She watched, rapt with attention, the shades of bliss and hunger that played across his face as he struggled to resist her ministrations. Failing miserably once she began to squeeze her way down, fingers coming to rest at the base of his cock where she gripped him firmly and gave a long, hard, pump of her hand.

That, it seemed, was his breaking point.

Sensation won out. He bucked hard into her fist, groaning, all attempts to stop her forgotten. He buried his face in her throat to muffle the sounds a repeat of the motion elicited. Again and again she worked him, building up to a pace hard enough to have him at her mercy, but too slow to bring him to his end.

He was not the only one who could tease.

A string of Elvish left his lips, feverish words whispered against her skin. So urgent and breathless that she only caught a single phrase – you undo me – before he bit down upon her shoulder. Hard. The sudden sting of pain stealing a sharp cry. At that, she slowed her hand. Drawing out a final stoke with a long, careful movement before she released him. As he shuddered, she drew a line from stomach to throat with a single finger, then cradled his head in her palm. Still nestled in the junction of her neck and shoulder.

After giving him a moment to catch his breath, "I dare say you want me too," she whispered with a grin. His body shook with silent laughter, and he brushed his lips over tender skin. Surely now they were even. And so, "I need you," she urged. Wrapping her legs around his waist again. "Solas, ma vhenan, please."

"Not. Yet."

She made an angry noise. Kicked her heel into his backside hard enough to give him a start, but he only kept laughing. After having waited this long for him to set aside his reservations about making love in a camp and give in to passion, she had no patience left for endless teasing. While she quietly fumed, he kissed her neck. Whispering soft Elvish against her skin as a hand slipped down her body.

“Ar’harthan mar irlahna.”

Oh.

That was his game.
He let his wicked promise hang in the air as his fingers swept over slick folds. Rubbing tight circles over her clit until he had her gasping, and then sliding two curled fingers deep inside.

“Gods, yes!”

She keened and writhed, helpless and lost to pleasure, as he worked a steady rhythm to the rock of her hips. It took no time at all to have her panting, open-mouthed, her forehead pressed to his. A quiet whine punctuating every breath while her hands gripped his shoulders. White-knuckled. Nails digging crescents into his skin. "Please," she begged, "Isalathe... elvar’el."

A sudden warmth bloomed within her. A rush – not painful, but deliciously teasing – spreading outward from her core. Seeping into her stomach, thighs, and chest. It was different from the connection magic he had used before. This seemed to arc through her body. Mana that surged from his fingers in quick, pulsing, waves that spread in all directions. His thumb circled and fingers thrust – every movement sending another wave through her. It tingled. It burned. Flooding her nerves, and driving her hard and fast toward her peak.

Before she could think to stop herself, she was crying out. Loud and unrestrained. Thighs twisting around his hand.

His lips were at her ear, then. "Hush," he whispered. "Or I will be forced to stop."

"Don't you fucking dare," she gasped.

Yet she couldn't seem to heed the advice; her cries rising from a quiet whine to a vocal gasp as the tension grew. She bit her lip to muffle the sounds but her breath was coming too hard now for it to work for long. She was vaguely aware of his voice at her ear, shushing her again, even as his hands urged her on. Harder. Closer. The world seemed to fall away. Her hips ground against him, head lolling helplessly back and forth as she fought to control herself.

She felt Solas' other hand slide up her body. Fingers brushing against her mouth, hesitant to cover it and yet all too aware of her increasing volume. He brushed his thumb across her swollen lips. "If you cannot quiet,” he said, “I'm going to cover your mouth." A question as much as a command, she knew – he would never do anything she did not consent to. But his breath was hot on her neck, and had she long ago lost the ability to answer him. And then she was cresting. Though she tried to contain it, a deep, guttural cry grew in her throat.

His hand clapped over her mouth with an audible slap.

Something about the pressure made it all the better, and it tipped her over the edge. She pressed a long, loud moan into his palm as she came. Hands clawing at his back, legs twisting, and toes curling. Shaking, as the waves crashed over her, again and again. The slow pulse of his magic, and the rhythm of his fingers, drawing out her climax for as long as her body could carry her. Then slowly – very slowly – he brought her down again. The pulse ebbing, mana receding, until then there was nothing left but the glow. And then she was gasping, weak and shaking beneath him.

His fingers slid from her, swollen flesh left wet and quivering. Yet still she yearned. Too sensitive to touch, and somehow still buzzing with desire. It was at once too much and not enough.

"My apologies," Solas said quietly, removing his hand from her mouth. He lay a kiss where his palm had been. "You did not seem able to quiet yourself on your own. I did not wish for you to be overheard." The look he gave her then was far too smug.

Her eyes narrowed. "You," she accused playfully.
She wrapped her legs around his waist, and rolled. Pinning him on his back beneath her. Her kiss was devouring; so eager to finally have him that their teeth nearly knocked together when her mouth crashed into his. Parting his lips to taste him. The deft movements of her tongue mirrored in the grind of her hips. Sliding wet folds along his hardened length. Satisfied, when the tease earned a wonderfully desperate noise from him. A choked groan that escaped between curses.

Rough hands on her back pulled and pleaded, urging her body closer. Fingers curling to dig into her flesh until she could feel the sting of his nails and the way his hands… trembled?

*Interesting,* she thought.

Lips and teeth left a trail of wet kisses along his jaw. "Are you cold?" she tested.

He laughed weakly. "Far from it."

"You're shaking."

His voice was thick and rough, even in a whisper. He hesitated before replying, "It seems I may have underestimated your effect on me."

*That,* she thought, was more than enough; she could not draw this out. Not after such an admission.

She reached down between their bodies and took hold of him with a firm grip. Felt his stomach tense in anticipation, all the air in his lungs escaping in a sharp hiss. She sheathed him in one slow, slick, movement – savoring the pinch and stretch of seating him to the hilt. This time, he was not able to hold his body still as he entered her – the warmth was too welcoming, and he too wanting – and he thrust upward, deep inside her, whispering a quiet curse in penance.

Ellana stilled, watching the pleasure play across his face in the way his eyes rolled back and squeezed shut. Lips parting for air, and chest heaving. He was frayed and raw – breathless – already lost to the moment. The first, slow, rock was met with a moan and a buck of his hips. Then his eyes found hers. Dark and heavy, desire laid bare. With parted lips, he gasped and groaned as they found a rhythm. Already worn ragged from the challenge of staying quiet, and scarcely able to lean up to kiss her.

She braced one hand against the center of his chest and the other on his hip, rising to sit upon him with her knees held tight to his sides. She moved in slow, deep, circles – gradually building speed – leaning back just enough to find that perfect angle. The one that buried him completely, and ensured each turn of her hips had his cock press *just* the right place within her. It was a technique that would bring them both to a quick end, she knew, but setting a record was not a priority tonight. This was not a night for slow and steady – they were wound far too tight for such luxury.

Aside, there was something wonderfully arousing about testing his restraint when he was in such a state. Unraveled, and struggling to maintain control; not lose himself too fast, as much as he yearned to. Though they had only spent the single night together, she was learning his tells – he was not shy with them – and so knew enough already to recognize when he neared his end.

As expected, it did not take much. For either of them.

Soon, she had him panting; softly moaning at the peak of every thrust. His nails digging crescents into the meat of her thighs. Tension built, coiling tight within her as she rode him. Her hips circling fast enough now that the tent filled with the wet, obscene, sounds of their bodies working together.

“Ellana,” Solas breathed. Then, "*Vhenan,*” his tone more insistent this time. "Ellana you— you must—" Another groan. His grip on her waist was so tight she could feel his hands trembling. His
breath coming in shallow gasps as though he was suffocating. A few more turns of her hips and he was moaning aloud, moving against her in erratic jerks and thrusts as he struggled to keep up with her frantic pace.

His eyes snapped open. "Ellana!"

It wasn't a whisper this time, but a panicked warning that threatened to carry across the camp. And so, abruptly, she stilled. The sudden loss of sensation wrenching a choked cry from his throat. Relief, as much as disappointment. He pushed his head against the bedroll and closed his eyes. It took a moment, but he managed to regain his composure: slow his breathing and ease the tension in his hips.

He swallowed. "You must slow down," he pleaded, his voice little more than a strained whisper.

As she leaned down, she gave a slow, sensual rock of her hips. Purring her reply against his ear, "And why should I?"

"You are – mmn – making it very difficult." Though the words were chiding, he could not hide the way the corner of his mouth curled. He was enjoying this just as much as she was.

Another slow rock. One he returned with an upward thrust and a breathy sigh – a wonderfully pleased sound. She smiled, nipping at his ear. "I think I like making it difficult."

He laughed, weakly, "That is certainly— ah!" But whatever more he'd wished to say was lost in a gasp when she sat up again and resumed the cycling of her hips. Reveling in the way his hands tightened to near-fists against her sides as she steadily increased her pace. It took even less time this round to have him trembling again, his stomach taut and tight as he struggled to keep his tenuous control. Her body felt electric, heat pooling in her core as she moved. It would not take much more for her to reach her pleasure, but she wanted to see him shatter first.

His chest was slick with sweat where she braced her hand against him, and she used the position to lean back further, weaving and rocking until she heard the gulping breaths that told her he was close. He whispered her name again; more of a plea than warning – and the sound sent a thrill through her. A groan, as she felt the tight coil of heat within her begin to unravel.

He jerked. Warned, "If you don't stop..." and dug his nails into her skin. She sped up. "Ellana." He gasped, began to call her name another time, then cut himself off with a low, heavy groan and a sharp curse. "Fenedhis, t-tel'diana, ma sildeara'on—" Then all at once he tensed, his body curling off the bedroll. The hard pulse of his release tore her over the edge with him. Had her rocking, frantic and wild. Choked gasps filling the tent as they rode through the waves of pleasure together.

When the last of the lingering aftershocks had abated, she collapsed onto his chest. The sound of his heaving breaths was almost as loud as the thump of his pulse, racing against her ear. It warmed her.

"Your heart," she murmured, grinning. "is pounding."

His laughter followed her own, and, "Yes," he replied simply.

He drew a hand up and over his face, wiping roughly at his sweat-slick brow, before allowing his arm to drop, boneless, onto the ground above his head. Ellana tucked her face into his neck, brushing a feather-light kiss against his skin. Smiling, content, as she felt his pulse slowly return to a normal pace beneath the touch of her lips.

They lay, silent and spent, in the glow that a long-awaited release brought them. Minutes passed
before Ellana spoke again. "You know," she began. Coy and playful. "If you were that wound up, you could have just asked."

To her surprise, he gave her side a quick pinch. She yelped, lifting her head off his chest to level him with a glare. He was grinning. "As I have said, a party camp is not the most appropriate place, and offers little in the way of discretion. We were fortunate not to have been overheard or interrupted. I was content to wait until Skyhold."

With a scoff, "Content is not how I'd put it," she informed, glib. "You were trembling."

He opened his mouth to retort, but the remark seemed to die on his tongue, and so he closed it instead, narrowing his eyes. "It has been some time," he admitted.

She smirked. "It's been a week."

"Since I have been intimate with someone," he clarified, pursing his lips.

"How long, then?" The question was a loaded one, but soft eyes and a raised brow were enough to tell him she was teasing.

A quiet, disapproving groan accompanied the decidedly unamused look he gave her. Regardless, he answered, "Many, many centuries."

"I suppose that could make one work up an appetite," she teased lightly.

"Hmm," he hummed in return. It was neither an admission nor a denial.

She shifted, releasing him with a gush that spread onto the bedroll beneath them. Neither had the mind to prepare, nor had they set camp anywhere near a source of clean water, and so were left without means to cleanse themselves. There were fresh cloths in Ellana’s pack, a supply she kept both for washing and her blood moon, but those supplies currently lay by her tent across camp. And she was still blissfully nude, with no want to retrieve them. Not when Solas’ arm was draped so lovingly about her shoulders.

They lay together in blessed quiet. Relaxed and content in each other’s arms, enjoying the sated glow of their union. Beyond the camp, the forest’s song of beasts and birds carried on the air, steadily lulling them toward sleep. The crackling of the dying fire offered little light anymore, and would soon need to be fed and stoked if it was to last into the dawn. It was only by the grace of sensitive Elven eyes that either could see in the dark of their – temporarily – shared tent.

It would be far too easy to stay this way. A warm, spent, tangle of limbs – tucked, naked beneath a blanket of furs and lying crooked on a single bedroll too small to hold a pair. Light fingers tracing patterns over sweat-licked skin, reveling in the simple intimacy of touch after too long without. A week of craving it, taking what they could in fleeting moments of privacy, and enduring the temptation of proximity the rest of the time. In spite of the inconvenience, and the risk, of having surrendered to passion while camped – they could not be bothered to care about the consequences. Not in this moment, at least, while they lay curled together. Light as air.

It was with a heavy sigh that Solas brought them back to reality. “As much as I would enjoy remaining this way, I imagine you are nearly due to end your watch.”

A reply came, muffled, from his shoulder. “Probably,” she admitted, though she made no indication to move.

The smile was evident in his voice as he continued, “Would you prefer the rude awakening we
would no doubt receive from Sera if you had not returned to your tent come morning?"

“She’s all out of lizards,” replied Ellana pointedly.

A quiet chuckle shook his chest, and by extension, her head where it lay upon it. “I am certain she
would find a suitable alternative.”

She sighed heavily, replying. “You’re probably right.” His arm tightened around her, just a little,
loath to let her go though both knew she could not stay. The next watch was due and she needed to
alert Cole, and tend to the fire, before returning to her own tent.

Still, she allowed herself a final moment to enjoy the warmth of his body before she began to
untangle herself from their embrace. She sat up, and reached for her clothes. But before she could
retrieve them, there came a soft touch to her arm. Curious, she stilled, and looked to Solas for an
explanation. “What is—” she began, but was soon silenced as he hooked both hands beneath her
arms and pulled her down for a fierce kiss. One he quickly deepened with the insistence of his
tongue between her parted lips.

The kiss was long, and slow; the heat between them tempered for now, but no less passionate. A
hand slide along her side, and the warmth of his touch on her cooled skin made her shiver. When he
pulled away, it was with a soft nip of her lower lip. And she smiled.

But for a second too long, he did not return it.

In his eyes, she saw the briefest flash of something vulnerable. Something anxious, and afraid –
before it was safely tucked away, and the corner of his mouth finally lifted. A smile that did not
quite reach his eyes. The look was all too familiar; one she had hoped not to see again. It dropped a
heavy weight into her stomach. And he did not look at all surprised when her own smile faded. A
sense of unease settling upon her.

Her voice was barely a whisper when she spoke again. A question she wished she did not have to
ask. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

Silence was her answer.

Chapter End Notes

I may post a 'deleted scene' from this in a new document come the next few days, so
keep a lookout for it.


TRANSLATIONS:
Ar'da'laven, sil'ma, ar tel'matha. Isalathe ma'dun, ma'numin = My touch, my thoughts,
they do not satisfy me. I need your body, your cries.
Ina'lan'ehn ma = You are so beautiful
asha’ elvar’nas, ma elgar’isalathe = wicked woman, you are a desire demon
ma vhenan = my heart
Ar’harthan mar irlahna = I would hear your cries
Isalathe... elvar’el = I need... more
Fenedhis, tel'diana, ma sildeara'on = [cursing], don't stop, you feel so good
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Ha. So... no more promises about schedules, because clearly that just jinxes the whole thing. I have been stuck on this for months and only just managed to gather enough steam to blast through it in the last two days. Endless thanks go to Kallika, Fairy_melt and Viking_woman for their wonderful reviews and comments that gave me inspiration when I was feeling like I would never post anything ever again.

This is far from done, I am just working on it at a rather glacial pace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

All at once, a wave of sound hit her ears, the shock of it throwing her into consciousness with a violent jerk.

A chorus of voices rang through the fortress: soldiers, stationed on battlements and in courtyards, barking orders that echoed and warped into an indistinct cacophony of sound. Too unintelligible to pull a single word, though she strained her ears to try. The shouts were underscored by the sound of dozens of armoured boots on the move. Followed by loud clangs as shields were equipped over armour. The echoing screech of swords and daggers hastily sheathed in their scabbards. A series of electrical cracks as magical barriers went up.

Ellana searched her memory for an explanation. Some sort of surprise training exercise from Commander Cullen? Perhaps a drill, or battle role play, to keep the troops on their feet? It was possible she’d missed a note, or simply forgotten about it amidst the upheaval of the past several weeks.

But then, there came the rickety clanks of the portcullis raising, followed by a thunderous pounding of many hooves. The sounds growing fainter with each passing second.

This was no exercise; people were fleeing.

That jarred her into action.

She threw aside the great cover of furs upon her bed, and leapt to her feet. She did not dally in her quarters; a brief glance at the mirror showed her reflection dressed and ready for battle. Clad in a fine suit of golden armour; a mix of mail and light plate polished to a mirrored shine. It was rich, form fitting, and finished with the drape of a heavy, woollen cloak that fastened at her neck with a jewelled clasp. The heavy greaves pounded a booming rhythm against the stone tiles as she made her way out of the tower — taking the rickety, wooden stairs two at a time — until reaching the door to the great hall. She threw it open with a mighty heave of her shoulder.

The sight that greeted her there froze her in her tracks.

It was chaos.

Dozens of men and women, all clad in similarly matching sets of armour, ran, frantic through the fortress. Most were armed with silver daggers, carried on a hip; one hand poised over the hilt and
ready to draw. Seasoned warriors carved a path through the crowd, carrying themselves with the confidence that bespoke years of training. While those who held no visible weapons moved with far less grace — widened eyes searched for exits, answers, or a superior whose orders to follow. Newer recruits not yet battle-worn, but tossed into the fray all the same.

The hall itself was in disarray. Walls once adorned by colourful cloth banners now stood bare, the décor torn to the ground. Symbols of pride and power, now crushed beneath a frenzy of panicked footsteps. Ripped, and forgotten. Several tables and chairs sat upended against the far wall. Next to one, lay the remains of several bowls once filled with fresh fruit and cooked meat. A puddle of fragrant wine pooled upon the floor by a shattered crystal bottle.

Her advisors were nowhere to be seen, and she did not immediately recognize any of the scattered troops. She’d yet to take the time to fully acquaint herself with the Templars and mages that had sworn fealty to the Inquisition – and was sorely regretting it now.

There was so much going on at once, and at such volume, that it was difficult to isolate any one voice to get a read on the situation. And the crowd was in such a panic that no one had yet noticed her presence and thought to inform her. Amid in the din, she was only able to pick out a few words here and there.


…Eluvian?

Her head snapped in the direction of the little room off the garden where Morrigan stored the artifact. Strangely, no one seemed to be headed that way. If anything, they were headed in its opposite.

Finally gathering her wits, she made toward one of the soldiers standing by the main doors. A tall, hooded, man in silver plate armour. One of several who had taken it upon themselves to stay by the doors; direct others toward the courtyard and stables. An icy blast of wind and snow met her approach, blowing in through the open door. With a wince, she tugged the hood of her cloak down over her face to shield it from the bite, cursing the mid-winter cold. It was just their luck to face a damned blizzard amidst the crisis.

“You there!” she called to the soldier, now recognizable as a bare-faced elf. He did not turn to face her when she addressed him, and so she raised her voice a little higher. “What’s going on? What’s —?”

From behind, someone took hold of her elbow, and pulled her bodily against the wall. Instinctively, she reached for the dagger at her hip, but when she whirled round to face her attacker she found a familiar face greeted her instead, both hands raised in defence.

“Solas!” she cried, in equal measures relief and alarm. Strangely, he was dressed neither for battle nor travel, something she found rather unsettling considering the circumstances. Instead, clad in his usual woollen tunic and a pair of worn breeches, the toes and heels of his bare feet visible beneath his leg wraps. She grasped his arm and, “What’s happening?” she demanded.

“Peace,” he soothed, lowering his hands. “We are in the Fade.”

Frowning, “…The Fade?” she parroted, regarding him with no small amount of confusion.

With a small smile, his eyes slid from hers, focusing on a point somewhere over her shoulder near the centre of the hall. He nodded. A subtle gesture; gentle encouragement to look around.
Curiously, she followed his gaze.

Understanding came to her slowly.

The pandemonium waned to a dull roar as she scanned the room. The clamour of noise and activity that was so sharp in her ears a moment past, paled; colours seemed to bleed together as soldiers and civilians alike drifted in and out of focus. Fading to a cast of indistinct characters on a hazy backdrop, leaving only her and Solas, standing clear and sharp among them. Sole members of an invisible audience.

He was looking at her, she noted. Eyes soft and patient; watching as she slowly became aware of the dreaming. It was only once she recognized the scene as an illusion that she was capable of perceiving all the subtle differences she had missed before.

It was Skyhold and yet… not Skyhold.

The first thing to draw her eye were the windows. They looked odd. Out of place. Another moment spent contemplating them and the reason became clear. Gone, were the stained glass scenes that Josephine had commissioned from artisans in Orlais. Replaced by sheets of soft, blue … something, which shimmered with an odd — beautiful — sort of iridescence. It looked a bit like water, though that could not possibly be true. Whatever it was, it shone with a brilliant, bright, light — one far more intense than that normally provided by the late morning sun. It was almost as if the material were its own light source; enchanted by unknown magic.

The statues, curtains and mid-level platforms were all gone, too. As was the throne she occupied for judgment, though the dais beneath it remained. The chandeliers were missing as well. In their place floated little orbs of light — magic — that danced in circles all about the ceiling. Some spell that, rather miraculously, appeared to be self-sustained. She saw no mage nor foci beneath it to feed its power.

Even the tables and chairs were different: carved in a strange fashion by unfamiliar craftsmen. Long, thin tendrils of swirling branches and vines made up the legs. Flowing up and around the edges of its surface in an intricate pattern of knots and whorls, as though grown instead of built. Their shape as beautiful as it was foreign.

When she looked again to Solas, he was smiling. “Very good,” he said, pleased. “Focus on the differences. Your ability to perceive the truth before you is governed by your existing memories of this place; separate yourself from them and the scene will grow clearer. Easier to understand. Lose sight of this distinction, and you will become enthralled.”

An armour-clad elf ran past her — unsettlingly, almost through her — and her eyes followed them until they disappeared through the main doors, directed toward the yard by a nearby soldier.

An elven soldier. Just like the one she had tried to hail, still standing behind her.

The coincidence seemed peculiar. It was not often that one saw an elf in a position of authority, let alone several of them congregating together. She cast her eyes about the hall, searching the faces of the men and women around her.

They were all elves.

No, she corrected, Elvhen.

Every soldier in the hall shared the same broad, tall, build as Solas — men and women alike. They were almost unrecognizable as kin of modern elves but for their large, bright, eyes and high
cheekbones on faces free of *vallaslin*. That, and the slim, pointed ears — though on a whole, much longer than those of her Dalish brethren — that peeked through gaps in their hooded cloaks.

Someone nearby shouted something about a sword, or dagger. A woman was searching for supplies in the armoury to disseminate to others. The words pricked strangely in Ellana’s ears. Spoken with an accent that was entirely foreign and yet somehow oddly familiar. It was only once she paid close attention to a single individual’s speech that the answer came to her.

Stunned, she turned to Solas with widened eyes. “They’re speaking *Elvish*!” she marvelled. His lips curled into a small, amused, smile and he nodded. Regarding her fondly as she turned her attention back to the crowd. “How is it I can understand them?”

“I have altered your perception of the language,” he explained. And, at her bewildered expression, quickly amended, “For the duration of the dream.”

She quieted then. Closing her eyes and taking a moment simply to absorb the miracle that it was to hear the true language of her people. A long dead tongue made of metaphor and emotion, flowing like a river from the mouth of every elf around her. Echoing in her pointed ears. A lost legacy her people had worked so hard to uphold.

Never before — nor again, she imagined — would she be able to hear such a wondrous thing.

Over time, she found that the more attention she paid to the words, the more easily their meanings came to her. Bringing a wide, pleased, smile to her lips. This was a gift — unintentional though it may be. And while certainly inappropriate, she found she could not curb the giddy sense of excitement that thrummed in her breast. She had always wished to know more of the language, and Solas’ occasional lessons aside, this may very well be the only opportunity she would ever have to understand it with perfect fluency… if only for the night.

She was startled from her reverie when the door to the war room — or, well, the war room of her Skyhold — flew open behind her. Three soldiers emerged, two women and one man. All dressed in identical sets of gold armour, rather than the silver that so many others wore. An indication of their rank and standing, she assumed. Heavy, velvet, cloaks floated behind them as they walked, giving them a presence that commanded attention. Their stride poised and confident. Other soldiers gave them a nod as they passed. *Generals*, she decided. One of the women paused near her to direct another toward the rotunda, before she headed toward the tower from which Ellana herself had first emerged.

Somehow, only then did it occur to her to ask the obvious question: “What is this?”

“A memory,” Solas replied vaguely.

“Do you know whose?”

He met her gaze. “*Mine.***”

Immediately, she took to scanning the crowd in earnest. Searching for a familiar face amidst the dwindling crowd in the room. A bald head, or perhaps one sporting the long, dark, braids he professed to once having.

With a push away from the wall, she made toward the centre of the room; slowly turning in place. The fortress was emptying quickly. Whatever disaster had befallen it spurred its populace into swift action: there were now less than a dozen elves remaining in the great hall — those left had delegated themselves to directing others to safety.
And yet, none appeared to be Solas himself.

Incredulous, she asked, “You were at Skyhold?”

He tucked his hands behind his back and stepped past her, artfully evading the remaining figures in the hall as he made his way toward the rotunda. “It was my stronghold, and a base of operations, for many centuries,” he explained. Then, realizing she had not followed him, he paused by the open door. A brow raised while he waited, clearly intent on guiding her somewhere.

Ellana canted her head to one side, the corner of her mouth lifting with a small smile. “Why am I not surprised?” she quipped with a huff of laughter. Adding, “Thank you for the castle, I suppose.”

He tipped his chin in acknowledgement. A flash of humour visible in his eyes when he replied, “You’re welcome.”

Turning, he entered the atrium, and this time she followed. Once inside, her eyes quickly found the walls. Bare, of course — she wasn’t sure why she expected anything more — this would have been well before he would ever paint his frescos.

“How long ago was this?”

A quiet hum as he considered. “Two thousand years ago, give or take a few hundred,” he answered. As though centuries worth of a margin of error were naught but moments.

She supposed they were, for him, and the thought was sobering.

She quickly pushed it aside.

Upon reaching the side door on the second level, he held it open; and with a sweep of his arm, gestured for her to follow him outside and onto the battlements. Together, they made their way toward the stairs that lead into the courtyard where a group of soldiers were climbing onto the backs of halla.

She could not help but stare, awed, at the sight of Elvhen riding the creatures with such ease. Within the Dalish, halla-riding was a difficult — if not near impossible — skill to hone. And among city elves, unheard of. The animals were intelligent, wickedly temperamental, and slow to trust. It took weeks, months, or even years of care to earn the rare and sacred right to mount one.

And yet, below her, scores of halla bowed readily to the warriors. Carrying them even as they clattered and banged in their heavy armour; never so much as flinching. There was not even the slightest hint of hesitation as the soldiers took hold of the reigns, and kicked them into action.

It took great effort to tear her gaze away, and finally ask the question that had been plaguing her since she became aware of the dream.

“What’s happening here? Were you under attack?”

Shaking his head, “No,” Solas replied, “They were evacuating.”

“Why?”

Presently, they reached the main courtyard. It was similar enough to her Skyhold to be recognizable. The shape was the same, at least. Though, it was clear that, like the rest of the fortress, much had changed over millennia. The tavern was missing, though that was not surprising. Its architecture was clearly Ferelden; suggesting it had been added to the hold relatively recently,
and likely by human hands. Many of the other courtyard structures were gone, too; like the armoury, and the building that housed the clinic.

The one striking difference was the rows upon rows of trees that bordered the inner walls: flora the likes of which she had never seen. Their branches sagged with both colourful blossom, and pebbled fruit. A strange sight, given that it appeared to be mid-winter. A fact made all the more obvious by the flurry of snow swirling around them. Already, there were several inches of fresh powder upon the ground, and more falling every minute. It gave way with a muted crunch beneath their feet.

“It was not safe,” Solas was saying. “The spell I cast on this day required an immense amount of power, and its effects were far-reaching. I was uncertain what impact it might have on those too close to the source, and so bid them to find refuge in one of my safe houses. While my command of magic left me reasonably assured of my own survival, the same could not be said of those who followed me.”

Ellana looked pointedly at a group of Elvhen who were fleeing through the portcullis at a run. “Looks like they weren’t exactly prepared for this.”

A pause. “No,” he conceded with a frown. “I had little time. I imagined it would not take long for the false gods to discover that I had deceived them, and come for me.”

The revelation was offered so casually she nearly missed it.

She blinked. “This was when — was where — you locked them away?” she marvelled, the surprise and awe clearly evident in her tone. Now more eager than ever to locate his image in the dwindling crowd. “How?”

Slowly, his gaze lifted toward the sky and, curious, she followed it. To her eye, it was unchanged. A storm brewed in the distant west, dark and foreboding. Advancing on slow winds that pushed it by inches across the Frostback Mountains. If the sky held anything else of interest, she could not see it. A blanket of muddied grey clouds, currently covering them in snow, obscured all else. Large, fat, flakes fell feather-light around them both, leaving no trace upon their skin. Now, nothing but forgotten wisps of ancient memory.

Several, silent, moments passed while Solas gathered his thoughts. Brows furrowed and face drawn as he watched the empty sky. When he finally spoke again, his voice was low. Quiet. “I created a barrier like no other,” he explained. Sadness weighed heavily upon his words, though she was not sure why. Given all he had said about his kin, it seemed unlikely he would regret having banished them. But, if there was any one thing to take away from all she’d learned, it was that there was much more to the old stories than she knew. And so she listened.

“A barrier that separated the waking world from the dreaming,” Solas continued, “and trapped the magic that was inherent to it, beyond. Bound to those forces while they searched for a weapon that did not exist, the false Gods too, became trapped. Then, separated from their physical forms and unable to pass beyond this barrier, they slipped into deeper realms, and slept. There, they remain.”

High above, the sky flashed. The heavy clouds illuminated by soft, green light: a ripple of magical energy that flared to life, but only for a second, before disappearing.

And all at once, it clicked.

A barrier like no other.

With newfound wonder, Ellana cast her eyes around the yard, taking in the scene once more: the
castle with its strange lighted windows, the trees with their winter fruit, the halla, the snow-covered ground... Everything in this old world was tied to magic; power that flowed all around them, free and infinite.

It occurred to her then that not a single one of the Elvhen she’d seen in the fortress carried a staff. Their ability to use and manipulate magic was inherent to their very existence; no need for staves, no worry of mana burn. No circles, Templars, or prejudice. For the Elvhen people, magical skill was as natural as breathing, Solas had once said, because there was nothing to hold it back.

“That Veil,” she murmured in reverent whisper, and looked to Solas in awe. “You’re talking about the Veil.”

His gaze was heavy when he turned it upon her. Eyes hard, and tight at the corners. Steeling himself for what response he would receive when he nodded, once, and replied, “Yes.”

For a long moment, she could do little more than stare, open-mouthed, in shock. The idea that the world she was born into had been so changed — crafted — by the hands of a single person who balked at the notion of divinity seemed ludicrous. The sheer magnitude of power required to accomplish such a feat, unfathomable. She almost laughed, amid her shock, but somehow managed to swallow the urge. Instead, stammering out a halting, “You... created the Veil?”

Her blatant incredulity brought the barest hint of a smile to his lips, and he inclined his head in agreement. Quickly adding, “It was not a task I accomplished easily,” as a caveat. As though the idea that the spell was challenging would somehow negate the fact that he was once capable of casting it. “The spell took years to conceive, required an immense amount of power, and casting it very nearly destroyed me.

“Once the Veil was in place, I was left virtually powerless, and ultimately forced to rest in uthenera for over two thousand years waiting for my strength to return.” With a grimace, he turned away. Adding an embittered, “It has yet to,” under his breath.

Before she could take a moment to ponder the implication of his words, the scene began to shift, and her attention was drawn away.

When the new memory came into focus, the hold was empty — all of the Elvhen rebels and refugees now safely evacuated. She could not be sure precisely how much time had passed between the two memories, but it couldn’t have been more than a few hours. The snow had stopped falling and now blanketed the courtyard, calf-deep. The once-distant storm churned overhead.

It was eerily quiet. The song of distant birds, and chirps of mountain creatures, curiously absent. She could hear only the creaking sighs of the fruit trees swaying in the breeze. The silence lent a sick, creeping, dread to the scene. As though the entire Frostback Mountain range were holding its breath in anticipation.

A knot of anxiety curled in her gut, and she shifted her weight from one foot the other to hide the way it made her twitch. Made her nervous. She crossed her arms over her chest, and tried to convince herself that the sudden chill she felt was merely a product of her imagination, and not the unease felt at knowing she was about to witness the sundering of the ancient world. An event so catastrophic that the only surviving stories describe it as divine betrayal.

There was distant movement on the bridge.

Something — someone — was approaching the main gates through the raised portcullis. As they
grew nearer, she was able to make out the silhouette of a tall elf seated on the back of a pure, white, halla. The animal’s great, twisted, horns parted around the figure, who was dressed in a fine suit of golden armour. Similar to what the generals wore — those she saw exiting the ‘war room’ — though notably finer. Looking down at herself, she realized the vision had bestowed the same set upon her. Almost identical, really, save for a few details. Instead of a cloak, the figure wore the pelt of a wolf, wrapped around both shoulders with the tail tucked into their belt. The upper skull of the animal rest upon their head, under a hood that cloaked their face in shadow. Only their mouth and jaw were visible beneath. Details that came into focus once the figure entered the courtyard.

A dimpled chin and full lips.

Ellana glanced between Solas, and the figure before them. “That’s you,” she noted, more statement than question. She’d recognize his sharp features anywhere.

He nodded curtly, but said nothing. Together, they watched as the memory of The Dread Wolf reached the centre of the yard and dismounted less than 50 paces from where they stood.

It was unsettling; the experience of looking upon the apparition of her lover. An image of himself taken from his own memory. Thousands of years before she was ever born, and yet virtually identical to the man who stood beside her now. Her eyes passed between the two uneasily. Even knowing of his origins, somehow she’d expected him to look different. Younger. Softer. Inexperienced, somehow. Yet the figure before her was a mirror image of the one by her side; he’d not aged a day. A living relic of an ancient, bygone world known only by the misremembered tales of her people. So much had happened in his lifetime — so much had changed.

She wondered if she could ever know it all.

She wondered if she wanted to.

The vision reached behind his back to adjust a cloth sack that hung from one shoulder. The fabric straining as it shifted; heavy with unknown treasure. Then, he laid a hand upon the side of the halla’s neck, leaning in to whisper words too quiet to hear. Whatever secrets he’d imparted were lost long ago.

The beast flicked an ear once — twice — before bowing its head. Twisted antlers touching the ground at Solas’ feet, before it left the keep at a gallop, while three figures looked on in silence. It was only once the halla disappeared from the horizon that The Dread Wolf retrieved what he carried in the satchel: a large, round, object — partially hidden by shadow — that he tucked into the crook of his elbow. He cradled it as though it were made of the finest glass, his free hand resting atop to hold it steady while he took his place in the centre of Skyhold’s courtyard.

Deep grooves ran along the surface of the stone. Whorls and parallel lines creating a pattern not unlike a fingerprint. A design that insisted at the edge of Elanna’s memory with nagging familiarity. It was only once he’d moved the object from elbow to hands, causing the marks to catch the light, that recognition struck.

That was no stone, it was an orb.

“A foci,” she thought aloud, and found herself recalling the conversation her and Solas had at the mountainside camp, following the destruction of Haven.

Solas confessed then, that the orb was Elvhen, and expressed his concern that humans would blame elves as a whole for the destruction Corypheus wrought with it. At the time, still reeling from her near-death experience, she had not truly considered his words, and so missed the more subtle
implications of such a warning. But with the clarity of hindsight, his fears sounded both presumptuous and hyperbolic. To hold an entire people responsible for the mere existence of an ancient weapon wielded by a mad, blighted creature seemed absurd — even for humans. Had she not known Solas so well, she would have brushed it off as paranoia — or prejudice — but for all she’d learned since, it cast the warning in a different light.

Somehow, she felt as though she’d just found a trail of breadcrumbs.

“These foci,” she began, “You’d said there were more; that they were dedicated to members of the pantheon. That was yours?” Turning, she found Solas was not watching the scene anymore. Instead, his eyes were on her. Brows knit over a gaze as pensive and unsure as she’d seen on the night he first confessed. He did not offer her a reply, though his silence was answer enough, and that sense of dread began to crawl its way back up her spine again.

Before them, the Wolf lowered himself to the ground. With the orb held firmly between his palms, he sat back upon his heels in the snow, and hung his head. Taking a deep, shuddering, breath in through his nose and holding it.

Then, for the briefest moment, he hesitated, and she was struck by the enormity of the task before him.

He was alone then, seated in a frigid bank of snow, balanced on the edge of thought and action. Faced with a choice he did not want to make, but was ultimately forced to. It was clear enough that he understood the risk; casting the barrier that would become the Veil could possibly — even likely — have dire consequences for both spirits and elves alike. But just how changed the world would be when the dust settled remained an unknown.

The false Gods were dangerous, violent, and unpredictable. Tens of thousands of innocents had already died at their hands, and countless more would fall if they were allowed to remain in power. He had to believe that the exile of the pantheon would do enough good to outweigh the spell’s potential for harm.

His fingers twitched against the surface of the foci as he sat, silent, buried to his thighs in the snow. Thinking. Considering. Passing the weight of his choices from hand to hand. To see the path that was laid out before him, and make himself understand that he had no choice anymore: there was only one viable option left to put an end to the oppression of the Elvhen people, and he had already waited too long to take it.

He pushed a heavy breath through his nose, steeling himself for whatever came next; be it their destruction or his own. And so, closing his eyes tightly, he dropped his shoulders, curled his body inward, and began to cast.

The magic built slowly.

At first, visible only as waves of energy; an odd sort of warping of the space around his hands. Like the strange, rippling, mirages Ellana had seen while traversing the Western Approach, when the hot air rose off the rocks. But unlike heat waves, these began to shift in colour — from a wavering, transparent, illusion to a soft, verdant, light that began to travel up his body. A deep green glow that grew in intensity as the spell charged, drawing upon a well of ancient magic from both within and around him, passing the energy through his body like a conduit.

As the aura engulfed him, his body appeared to crack. Fissures and tears of light spreading across his skin like a network of spider’s webs, as though the force of the spell was tearing him apart, too. Somehow, he held together; and with teeth bared against the pain, he released the orb, floating it
into the air above him. Tense seconds ticked by until, finally, the spell was released with a mighty bang as loud and powerful as a lightning strike. The blast creating a shockwave strong enough to crumble the walls of the ancient courtyard, sending chunks of stone tumbling to the ground around them.

Ellana stumbled backward, startled by the intensity, and instinctively brought up her hands to guard her ears. Needlessly, it seemed, as what followed was not so much quiet as it was the absence of sound. An odd sort of muted silence that made her ears feel as though they were stuffed with cotton wool.

Before her now stood a great pillar of light, cast by the orb, that stretched upward from the shattered ground into the swirling maw of dark clouds high above. Magic churned and rolled with the storm, devouring angry forks of lightning as readily as the broken pieces of Skyhold’s shattered walls, floating up from the ground. It was a scene not unlike the one they’d witnessed in the Fade, over Adamant, and she did not miss the implications of such a coincidence.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it was over.

The pillar shattered to dust with another thunderous crack, and the sky itself seemed to snap. The shock sent out a second wave; ripples of magic that stretched over the mountains and disappeared beyond the horizon. Leaving only a few, lingering, sparks in its wake; little pieces of shattered spells now disconnected from the magic that once sustained them.

When the dust settled, all that remained of the scene was an endless expanse of rubble, snow, and two silent witnesses.

The figure of The Dread Wolf and his orb had disappeared. Gaps in his memory wrote him out of the aftermath; leaving behind only the destruction he’d wrought, frozen in time.

The silence that followed felt deafening, and for several long moments, Ellana neither spoke nor moved. The weight of understanding fell heavy on her shoulders, and for the first time since all of this had begun, she wished she could take it back. Return to a state of blissful ignorance, when the lines on the battlefield were clearly drawn. A conflict between two sides: light and dark, good and evil.

It was easy to blame a monster for the world’s chaos.

The truth was so much worse.

Her gaze fell upon the edge of the courtyard; the trees, standing colourful and proud mere moments before, were now cracked and wilted. Branches heavy with rotted fruit. Their roots, unearthed by the fissures opened in the ground when the Veil tore through it, clawed at the earth like gnarled fingers. Reaching for the magic that once sustained them.

One of many beautiful things lost by the raising of the Veil.

“It’s yours,” she said quietly. It was neither question nor accusation, and begged no reply. “The orb Corypheus carries. You used it to cast the Veil, that’s how it created the breach. Created…” she trailed off, raising her anchored hand. Cradling it in the other as she traced a thumb over the tear. Gently at first, and then with nails drawn, pressing them deep into her flesh as though she could dig the cursed magic from her palm.

She thought back to the torrid night of confessions, and how the anchor flared beneath Solas’
touch. Power he could not only draw from her, but quell with nothing more than the gentle brush of his fingers. And, *It’s his*, she realized. All of it — all of *this* — was his.

His orb.

His anchor.

His magic.

*His fault.*

The thought drew a humourless laugh, and, “What luck,” she said pointedly, meeting his eyes at last. “To have fallen for the one person who could potentially control the anchor, and fix all of this.”

Solas frowned. “My feelings for you have always been genuine,” he assured.

She held his gaze a moment more before she turned away; eyes scanning the empty horizon, lost to the silence. It was dusk now, she noted, the sun just beginning its descent behind the mountains. In the distance, snow-capped peaks sparkled, picking out shades of red and gold from what sky could be seen beyond the clouds. It was as beautiful as any sunset she had watched from her tower room. The view virtually unchanged, even after thousands of years. Even after the world was split in two.

“Is that why you’re here? To retrieve this orb of yours?” asked Ellana softly.

“And to stop Corypheus,” Solas added. Then, with a note of tension in his voice near to pleading, “His rise to power poses a threat to all of us; possession of the orb has only made him more danger —”

“This is your magic — the anchor?” she cut in, talking over him. He blinked, briefly taken aback by the interruption, and at his nod she continued, “Could you remove it?”

After a moment of silent contemplation, he extended an open palm, gesturing for her hand. She did not hesitate to give it. A familiar crease formed in his brow as he considered the mark, fingers playing across her palm, skirting the edges of the scar with careful precision. “I could, were my power restored.” A pause. “As I am now, however, I cannot.”

“And I assume *that* has something to do with the orb as well?” she challenged, retrieving her hand from his own before he could indulge in cradling it.

“Yes,” he admitted. “When I woke, I was too weak to unlock it.” Another pause, as he took a breath to steady himself. Standing tall to feign what confidence he could not muster before the sting of her anger. Deserved as it was. “Allowing it to fall into Corypheus’ hands was a calculated risk,” he explained. “I believed he had the ability and opportunity to unlock the orb, and the resulting magical explosion should have killed him. I had no way of knowing he had discovered the secret to relative immortality.”

“You— this— *all of this!*” Ellana began haltingly, gesturing around them with her anchored hand. “—All of those *people* at the temple!” Her eyes were wild when she turned them upon him again. “They all died so you could have your power back? And it didn’t even work?”

“Ellana—” Solas began, taking a step toward her.

But again she cut him off, pushing his hand away before he could touch her. “What did you intend to do with it once you had it ‘unlocked’?” she pressed.
He fell quiet, suddenly aware of the chasm between them. A cavernous gulf of his thousands of years — of war and of death — that hung, unrealized, in the space of the two steps she’d retreated from him. In her short life, as difficult as it had been, she could not possibly experience enough to understand the sacrifices one must make in the quest for peace. The sacrifices one makes in the name of war. To her, his actions would seem reckless. Cold. Ill-thought, perhaps… rather than the culmination of centuries of meticulous plans. To share them was its own risk; a conversation he’d practiced a hundred thousand times before. Though in no version did he see it ending with her sympathy.

In no version did he see that she would not oppose him — and stay.

Ultimately, there was nothing for it but to see it through the end, and so he took in a breath, and steeled himself for her fury.

“I would tear down the Veil, and restore the Elves.”

The shock of this revelation silenced her for but a moment before her face twisted with anger, lips curling over bared teeth. This, at least, was something he’d prepared well for.

“And how many would die, then?” she snapped. “Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? When we are flooded with the magic the Veil held back, what will happen to those who have lived in this world without it?”

“I have no way to know for certain,” Solas replied evenly, retreating behind the guarded façade he’d worn for so long. He spoke quickly — confident and detached — as though he were reading from a scouting report rather than a death sentence.

“I suspect that many would perish. If not from the initial flood, as you say, then from the chaos that followed. Human and Qunari mages may be disproportionately affected: their limited training, coupled with their lack of natural affinity for magic, would leave them dangerously overpowered. Elves and elf-blooded would fare better, though learning to harness their abilities would not come without cost. It would be as though all the power of the highest Grand Enchanters and Magisters were placed in the hands of infants.”

The insult was paid so thoughtlessly that it left her momentarily stunned; she’d thought him beyond such prejudices. Hoped him beyond, at least. Hearing him refer to her people as helpless babes stung even more than his refusal to count her among them. She was spurred forward by the fury that twisted in her breast, and the wounds left by his distain. “Have you even tried and find a way to mitigate the damage, or are we so meaningless beneath your divinity that you could not be bothered to care?”

The accusation struck true enough to pierce beyond his mask, and for a moment, she saw it slip. “I have thought of little else since I woke,” he countered, hackles rising. “If such a way were possible, it is outside the scope of my knowledge and ability.”

And so does not exist, he left unspoken, though she did not miss the implication.

“You are immortal, Solas,” she hissed through clenched teeth, gesturing toward him in emphasis. “You have the luxury of endless time to find it.”

“And the fact that you do not is my burden to bear! Bringing down the Veil would restore immortality to all elves!”

This time, she did not recover from the shock so quickly. And the silence that followed his
admission only served to widen the gulf between them ever further.

“The anchor was not intended to be wielded by anyone other than myself,” he said after a time. Voice straining with the effort of remaining calm. “It will ultimately consume you, leave Corypheus in power, and throw the world into even deeper chaos.” He scoffed, shook his head, and uttered a quiet “No,” almost to himself. Then, louder, “it would be preferable, though hardly ideal, to act sooner rather than later.”

“But you could act later,” she interjected, pointing an accusing finger in his direction. “If you could slow down the process — to draw it out over years — would that ease the transition for those most at risk?” He held her gaze, but said nothing.

It was all the confirmation she required.

“Why not take that path, instead? We may not be immortal mages we once were, but we are still people. We have built meaningful lives with unique cultures, history that you would so readily sacrifice for—”

“You would call hundreds of years of oppression and violence at the hands of Humans a worthy history?” he retorted. “Following the Exalted March, what little was left of the Elves either gave themselves over to Orlais, or retreated to the Dales to live as savages.”

“Watch your tongue, Solas,” warned Ellana in a low growl, “I am cut of the same cloth.”

“No, you are different—”

“Different? Not one week ago you said our people were not so far apart, but here — now — you draw the line?” Wrath sharpened her words, and she spit them from her lips as though they were poison. “Is it just my lack of magical talent that separates me from your worthy kin, or are my ears not long enough, as well? Tell me, if we still lived in the ancient cities as mages, would we suddenly be worth saving?”

She knew what the answer would be before she asked the question, but foresight made it no less painful to hear the hesitation on his breath before his lips parted to reply. A denial he took just a second too long to conjure. And so with a bitter laugh, she cut off the aborted attempt, accusing, “Not worth saving — but worth taking to bed?”

He bristled. “That is not fair.”

“Fair?” she echoed with a mocking laugh. ‘Fair?! None of this is fair! You putting the fate of all Thedas in your hands is not fair! What gives you the right?”

“Because I must fix this!” he yelled, pressing an open palm to his chest. The last vestiges of his control giving way in one, long, stride to close the distance between them. An attempt at intimidation that utterly failed to faze her. Though he stood head and shoulders taller, she had never been one to cow so easily in a fight. On any other day, it was a trait he’d come to appreciate — to love — but here in the Fade, in the heat of this argument, he found himself wishing she were not so unmovable.

As their voices rose, and Solas’ focus shifted away from maintaining the illusion of memory, the setting of ancient Skyhold began to deteriorate around them.

Snow-capped battlements melted into the ground, the sky above them darkening. The scene of a lonely mountaintop fortress slowly shifted into one of destruction, war, and death. Of cold fury, and the cursed nightmares that feed upon it. With this, came a malevolence that insisted at the
edges of their awareness, drawing the presence of spirits and demons like moths to a flame.

Like a pestilence, the miasma grew faster the further it spread. Seeping into the ground, tainting it as it traveled along the sprawling landscape. Swallowing everything in its path.

Neither took note of the change, or the way their arguing fed it. In turn, how it served to heighten their anger.

“This is my mistake, my wrong to right!” Solas was shouting. “I sentenced Elves to generations of suffering. The consequences of my actions were far more grave than I ever could have anticipated. Spirits, confused and terrified by the sundering of the Dreaming, tried to pass through the Veil and twisted themselves into demons. Beings who are then ultimately slaughtered. Beautiful creations — libraries filled with the knowledge of all the ages, places and structures intrinsically tied to the Fade — shattered and destroyed in an instant. The paths between the cities disappeared, dooming thousands to die in the spaces between.” He cut the air with a swipe of his hand.

“And what happens when your perfect world falls prey to the same cycle once more? What will you do then?” she countered, still unaware — though not unaffected — by the darkness that had encroached upon their shared space. The fog nearly surrounded them now, a cloud of poison that had shaped the scene into one of its own make.

She continued, “War and corruption always has, and always will, exist. You know this better than anyone else possibly could. You sacrificed everything in the hopes of freeing your people from the oppression of powerful beings, and then would proudly restore this imbalance as long as Elves came out on top! Our lives are no longer the only ones at stake. Put aside your Elvhen glory for one minute and consider the impact of your actions, of all it could destroy — again! For all your pride you would—”

“I am not Corypheus,” he bit with another sharp sweep of his arm, cutting her off before the accusation could leave her lips.

“No,” she conceded, “but if you truly intend to walk this path without seeing us as equals you will be remembered as no better.”

“Have I not already been? Your people’s myths cast me a monster for opposing the Evanuris, for raising the Veil!”

“And tearing it down will only bring about more ruin. It will not slake your guilt!”

With fists balled tight at his sides and pulse racing, Solas pressed his mouth into a hard line, jaw clenched to bite back the cutting remark had been ready on his tongue before he thought better of it. Instead, he let the silence speak for him, and it was by grace of this choice that the torrent of fury and righteous indignation that threatened to overwhelm them both, lost just enough of its hold for him to become aware of the shift in their surroundings.

The miasma, now a turbulent mix of wisp and hostile spirits drawn to the turbulence they had created in the Fade, had eclipsed the scene almost entirely. A cloak of living darkness that obscured all but for a circle around their feet. Ellana made to take a step backward, into the cloud, and lost her footing; reeling from the vertigo Solas had unwittingly caused with his inattention.

One hand darted out to catch her firmly by the wrist and yank her back, gathering her in his arms — so tight against his chest he could feel the thrum of her racing heart. Stunned by the sudden shift in his demeanour, she blinked up at him with eyes wide. The heat of her furor tempered by bewilderment, and then fear, as she too became aware of the danger they’d inadvertently put
themselves in.

Solas closed his eyes, and drew in a long, slow breath through his nose. As he exhaled, the darkness dispersed, as if blown away by a powerful wind. Retreating back over the mountains and out of sight, until once more they found themselves standing in the centre of a crumbling courtyard amid a fall of snow.

They held each other a moment more, still reeling, before Solas let his arms drop and fall heavy at his sides. Once free of the embrace, Ellana took a step back. Awkwardly evading his gaze and shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

They were silent a long time.

Until at last, “What would you have me do?” Solas implored. With his anger spent, and the weight of her disapproval like a yoke around his neck, he was left defeated, and exhausted. He did not reach for her again.

Softly, she asked, “Could the Veil come down peacefully?”

He shook his head. “I do not know.”

“Find out,” she commanded, and though her tone lacked the bite it held before, her words were far from gentle. “If this would truly put the world right, as you say, I would do all I could to help you. If you can restore magic and immortality to the Elven people, without bloodshed, I will help you. But if you truly intend to raise Elvhenan at the expense of the entire modern world, I will not stand beside you.” And though she knew that it would follow her words, the flicker of hurt that crossed his face was no easier a burden to bear. She looked away, and with a subtle shake her head, “I love you,” she added in a whisper. “More than I have loved anything. I fear I would die for that.”

“No,” Solas answered sharply. “I would not allow—”

“My life is no more important than any other — be it Elf, Human, Dwarf or Qunari — simply because you have come to care for me. If you took the time to see the value in this world, as I do, I believe you’d see the merit in saving it. After all, I came from it, didn’t I?”

For that he had no reply.

Once more they stood a world apart, silent for the space of several shaking breaths, before Ellana finally turned away. “Now please—” she plead. The threat of tears lending a quaver to her voice she couldn’t quite hide. “Wake me up.”

She woke with a gasp in a room blanketed by darkness. Silent, but for the sound of the dying fire crackling in the hearth, and her ragged breaths.

It was still early; the sky only just beginning to shine with the first light of dawn. There were hours yet before someone would come to rouse her, though she doubted she’d be able to rest until then.

For a time, it was all she could do to lie still and wait for her pounding heart to slow. Swallow the lump in her throat and press her fingers to the knot in her stomach that stubbornly refused to untangle.
She closed her eyes tightly, and took a final, deep, breath to lend her the strength to turn and look at
the empty space next to her where Solas had laid mere hours before.

And in the quiet safety of her tower room, she buried her face in both her hands, and cried.

Chapter End Notes

TL;DR - everything went worse than expected.

1–2 more chapters left before a point that was originally going to mark the end of the
fic, but has now morphed into a timeskip, due to the development of some vaguely
plot-like traits.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Once meek, and in a perilous path  
The just man kept his course along  
The Vale of Death.  
Roses are planted where thorns grow,  
And on the barren heath  
Sing the honey bees.

— William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Though it was clear Solas’ discontent had not gone unnoticed, it took a week before someone deigned to approach him about it.

Both inner circle and staff alike had given him a wide berth; the only words he’d exchanged with anyone in days were polite, passing, greetings accompanied by a strained twitch of his mouth meant to intimate a smile. Perhaps a comment on the weather, or a cordial nod at the suggestion of there being some sort of interesting news coming out of Orlais. Spending no longer than a moment or two before he managed to extricate himself from conversation and return to his task.

Work was an easy and attractive escape; a few reports for Leliana and Josephine notwithstanding, he’d done little more than bury himself within it. Alternating between mornings at his desk and afternoons in the lower archives before retiring to his room early with a request to have the evening’s meal left by the door, if he requested it at all.

A schedule tailor made for isolation.

He’d barely interacted with anyone, and truth be told few had any desire to interact with him. Not that he was ever much of a socialite, but the heavy tension knit in his brow by the prison of frustration and guilt he’d built for himself did little to endear him to idle conversation, and it was apparent to even the most casual observer. A marked difference from the ease of which he carried himself upon first returning from Redcliffe with the rest of the Inquisitor’s entourage. To those who had remained behind, his uncharacteristically pleasant mood seemed to last barely a day before he’d slipped back into a more familiar pattern of quiet brooding, and so let him be. But he was well-acquainted with being alone, and under most circumstances would prefer it.

As such it had not been terribly difficult to advertise his preference just enough to ensure he remained that way. Standoffish and stoic, though not so much as to risk his preoccupation being mistaken as rude.

All things considered, when a visitor dropped by in the late afternoon and greeted him with a pointed question, he was left rather flummoxed by the interruption.

“What’d you do?”
Solas glanced up from his papers, inked quill stilled upon the parchment in mid-stroke, and found Varric Tethras leaning against the opposite side of his desk, propped up on one elbow.

Somehow he’d failed to notice the dwarf’s approach, and furthermore the motivation for his visit. Varric almost never came to the rotunda, instead preferring to spend his afternoons seated at a table in the great hall, just outside the doors. The coveted spot awarded him the opportunity to eavesdrop while remaining largely unnoticed by his quarry. A trait of particular import for a writer who gathered much of his inspiration from those around him.

It had become a favoured haunt of his and he rarely left it; Solas had seen him there as recently as an hour or two previous, scratching at his notes.

A quick study found the dwarf carried neither parchment nor package for delivery, and his demeanour conveyed no sense of urgency. If anything, he seemed bored; leaning heavily on the side of the desk, gaze averted, as he idly picked at a fingernail and brushed the resulting dirt off the lapel of his coat before moving onto the next one.

Solas searched his memory for a conversation, or even a vague suggestion of an appointment that would have prompted the interruption, but ultimately came up empty.

Once a moment had passed between the two without Varric giving any further explanation for his presence, Solas returned to the task before him and offered a brusque reply. “If this is a social call, I would prefer you return later. I am quite busy with—”

“—The same thing you were ‘busy with’ the last time you were avoiding her,” Varric finished for him, his tone disarmingly informal. “Yeah, I noticed that.”

He allowed a moment to enjoy Solas’ predictably stunned silence before he continued. “You’ve been skulking around Skyhold all week like you’ve got a raincloud as your personal escort. I was hoping she’d pick another fight with you so you two could wander off and make up, but you’ve barely even looked in the direction of her quarters all week, let alone spoken to her. And, for whatever reason, she seems just as unlikely to start a conversation with you.” He shrugged, and scratched at his chin. “So, I’ll ask again: what did you do?”

Once Solas had recovered from the initial bewilderment, offence was quick to take its place. This was overstepping, even for Varric. He hadn’t the faintest desire to participate in a conversation on this subject; not now, not ever. His personal affairs were his own business and Varric’s untimely peek into them during their previous journey hardly granted him the right to meddle. The fact that he knew anything at all about his relationship with the Inquisitor was purely by accident.

Furthermore, discretion was of the utmost importance — the Inquisitor had worked hard to gain a modicum of respect as an elf leading a pseudo-religious Human organization — and if their entanglement became common knowledge it could cause irreparable damage to her reputation. Varric knew this perfectly well, and for whatever reason still chose to bring up the subject in the middle of the rotunda.

The fact that no one in the building would be able to hear them speaking at a conversational volume was beside the point.

Once more, he returned his attention to the papers before him, replying with a not-insignificant note of irritation, “While I appreciate the concern, I would respectfully ask that you—”

“With equally due respect,” Varric interrupted with a smirk that toed a dangerous line between amused and patronizing. “I really don’t care what you respectfully ask of me. I’m not here for your
benefit, Chuckles.” He paused, hummed as he considered his words, then corrected himself. “Alright, maybe a little for your benefit — but mostly for hers. It’s clear you’re both miserable and that, given the chance, you’ll continue to be for long enough to spread that misery to everyone. It’s like a plague of sadness.”

Solas took a measured breath. “Colourful metaphor aside—”

“And really, you’ve been almost pleasant to be around since you two started spending your evenings together. If anything, it’s in the best interest of the Inquisition on a whole that you continue to do so.”

_Completely inappropriate._

“Varric—”

“It does get me wondering what you two could possibly have to argue about. Battle strategy? Ancient Elvhen artifacts? The religious practices of the Dalish? The colour of the curtains?”

This time Solas held his tongue, waiting until he was absolutely sure Varric was finished with his rambling before trying to get a word in. The repeated interruptions were chipping away at what little patience he possessed for the dwarf’s probing questions. It was only after a sufficiently long and expectant pause where he, presumably, was actually expected to offer a reply that he risked another attempt.

“I—”

“Not that I’d think you so domestic.”

Varric cast a sidelong glance at Solas’ reddening ears and the muscle twitching in his jaw before turning his attention back to his fingernails. “You don’t strike me as someone who has strong opinions about window dressings.”

That was the tipping point.

Solas brought a palm down upon the table, the resulting clap loud enough to give Varric a start. “Is there a _point_ to this?”

“Of course,” answered Varric. His tone was infuriatingly jovial, and it seemed to only encourage him to see the way it rankled Solas’ already frayed nerves. “Ideally, to persuade you to go talk to her.”

“And what would you suggest I do?” Solas snapped, returning his quill to its bottle with enough force to rattle it. Varric raised a single brow at the brazen show of anger, but did not deign to interrupt him again. “Waltz into the middle of an advisory meeting and demand she drop everything to continue an argument? Persuade her to see reason and from there on dolefully accommodate every one of my positions on matters of contention?”

“Is that what you want?”

“No! Of course I don’t want that. I have always welcomed her candour, but she does not underst —!” And abruptly, he stopped. Closing his mouth with a snap. He watched Varric’s brows climb a little higher on his forehead, accompanied by the smallest quirk of the corner of his lips. The complete look falling _just enough_ on the side of smug that Solas knew he’d been had.

This was now the _second_ time Varric had successfully tricked him into revealing far more about
his personal affairs than he was entirely comfortable with.

It was with a heavy sigh that he realized the entire encounter had been crafted to push him to lose his temper. Forcing him to lower his guard in the hopes that he would inadvertently discuss — or at least mention — what was troubling him. In retrospect, the ploy was glaringly obvious. The rogue was maddeningly talented in this brand of manipulation and his susceptibility to it only served to stoke his temper. He’d even seen it employed on multiple occasions.

Solas leaned heavily into one hand and, over a single measured breath, scrubbed his fingertips across his forehead before settling on pinching the bridge of his nose, eyes closed.

Good intentions or no, the man was infuriating.

When it became obvious that he was unwilling to offer anything more, “You know, you’re pretty terrible at this,” Varric prompted gently.

Solas scoffed. “Conversation?”


Truthfully, he could concede that point.

It had been more years than he could count since he’d had a lover, and regardless of the length of his affairs, none had grown into a proper partnership. What few memories he had left of paramours were fleeting passions, brief connections and no promises. Be it years or centuries spent with another, it was never anything one could define with such a label.

Once his rebellion began, the desire for companionship was a distraction he could not afford, and so was cast aside for the greater good of the people he was fighting for.

Harden your heart to a cutting edge.

Upon waking, his only purpose was attaining the orb to further his plans, and the mission made him rigid and single-minded. Before joining the Inquisition, he felt naught but pity for the modern people and their disconnection from magic. For all his careful planning, he never anticipated falling to the temptation of a quick wit, delicate fingers and soft lips. And while he was still unsure if this dance between them could be called a relationship, what he had felt and experienced with Ellana thus far was closer to it than anything that had come before her.

Beyond attraction was the desire to be heard, to share; to connect on a deeper level than purely physical. To know her: her fears and desires, history, her aspirations and failures.

To kiss every freckle and scar, and learn every curve of her body so well he could carve stone in her likeness.

To have her love and respect and return it in kind.

At no point, he realized, had he cultivated a connection with another person deep enough that an argument with them felt painful. He did not want nor need her unwavering loyalty; mindless acceptance without debate. More than anything, he desired understanding. What was lost, what remains, and the need to set it right.

The people in this time lived quickened lives, their memories short and fleeting — they did not take time to build monuments to progress and share their knowledge. Instead, they hoarded it. Worse, the short-lived elves of this time had no concept of their own origins or history. The sheer
gravity of harm that raising the veil inflicted upon the world, and the splendour that could be recovered should he succeed in tearing it down.

It was impossible to impart this knowledge to her. The gulf between them stretched too wide to bridge, and his kin too different from her own. Though still, in his solitude with pithy hopes he’d not give voice to, he yearned.

A long silence passed while Varric left Solas with his restless thoughts. It was clear enough to him that whatever had transpired between the two was more complicated than a lovers quarrel. He had no wont to drive the full story out of Solas — nor would he ever consider himself talented enough to do so, the man liked his mystery — only to make him approach the problem from a different angle. For all his scholarly knowledge, the elf was completely inept at communicating with another person and needed all the help he could get, even if he’d only accept it at knife-point.

“Look,” Varric offered after a time. “Do you want my advice?”

“No, though I doubt that will stop you from giving it.”

It didn’t.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself and go talk to her. The trick to solving an unsolvable argument isn’t brow-beating them into taking your side, it’s giving them the context to understand your position even if they don’t share it. The goal isn’t to come out victorious, just to leave things better than they were before.”

That, Varric noted, was something Solas did not have a counterpoint prepared for. Instead, he stared down at his desk beneath a furrowed brow, and said nothing. While it seemed unlikely, Varric could only hope this meant he was at least considering his words. He had no real expectation that his advice would be heeded, but at the very least he’d hoped to plant a seed.

He allowed another moment for the speech to sink in before adding a light, “And you could stand to dial back the pomposity a bit,” and flashed him a wry smile.

Solas appeared unmoved.

“If you’re done with the lecture,” he replied dryly, “I would bid you leave; this research is important to the Inquisition, regardless of your personal views on it, and I have much of it to tend to.”

Well, at least I tried.

Varric sighed. Shrugged, and lamented, “Alright, alright.”

Turning, he headed toward the door that exited into the great hall; mulling over the conversation as he walked. Could he have added more sage wisdom? Find some other compelling point to make that could have made Solas drop his immutable facade long enough to actually listen? To someone other than himself, that is. Maker help him, he was so damned resistant to the slightest implication that someone may know more than he did about something. No one would argue that the breadth of his knowledge wasn’t impressive, but his capacity for self-reflection was virtually non-existent. Perhaps he’d simply spent too much time as a lonely apostate to be humble. His response was predictable, but disappointing nonetheless.

Until he went and did something completely unexpected.

“Varric?”
The call came just before he’d stepped into the alcove by the exit, stopping him in mid-stride. He cocked his head to one side. Surely that wasn’t an apologetic tone he was hearing?

“Yeah?” Varric tested.

Solas hesitated on the reply for long enough that he had very nearly decided he'd hallucinated.

“Thank you.”

Now I know I’m hallucinating.

Varric tossed a glance over his shoulder. Solas gave him a respectful nod and held his eye for just long enough to convey his sincerity, then gently plucked his quill from the bottle of ink, and continued working.

He knew better than to push it, and so hid a smile with downturned gaze as he once more turned to leave. Just as he approached the door a flutter of movement from the stairwell caught his attention. A flash of gold from a lavish pair of shoes.

Dorian quickly descended the last few steps and joined stride with Varric, exiting the rotunda at his side. “That was clever,” he commented, pitching his voice low so not to carry. “I heard some of that. Not all of it, but well enough to get the gist.”

Varric smirked. “And here I thought I was being discrete.”

“Oh, you were, I’m just a very practiced eavesdropper,” Dorian quipped.

Once they’d made it through the great hall and safely out of earshot of any passing staff, he leaned down a little and asked, “Do you think it will work?” in a stage whisper.

“Maybe,” Varric sighed. “Solas is pretty proud, but she tends to unbalance him. He is terrible at this.”

“Atrocious.”

“Completely,” he agreed. “And you should leave him alone for a bit so he can work this out, if he’s going to. For her sake.”

The mage’s lips twisted into a comically displeased sneer, but after some reflection he eventually settled on something resembling reluctant agreement. He gave a deep, exaggerated sigh. “Alright, that’s fair. Wouldn’t want to spook him.” Raised fingers flicked at the air in emphasis.

Varric’s grin widened. “You can always tease him later.”

“I’ll make sure that I do.”

He laughed. “I’d expect no less.”

*

Ellana kept to herself most evenings. Found a small stack of paperwork from Josephine’s desk — letters, requests, orders and lists — and took them to her room for review. She wasn’t expected to
answer them all, or any really, but it gave her something to keep her mind focused on a single task when she felt overwhelmed by all the other little things that were drawing it away. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to practice her reading and writing; skills she had no need for as a Dalish hunter, but were expected of her as the Herald. With all the rumour and superstition about savage elves standing on the tails of her rise to power, illiteracy and letters that looked to be written in a child’s hand would not play well to her detractors.

Josephine was a fine teacher of Common, but true mastery was coming far more slowly than Ellana liked. The path to knowledge laden with unexpected bumps and detours. Before her introduction to the lesson plans, she’d never have anticipated that the process of learning to write would be so complicated. There were so many niggling details: having to learn the correct way to hold a quill and why it mattered, how long it took for various types of ink to dry on various types of parchment, and the fact that there were two versions of every letter of the alphabet. One of which could only be applied in very specific circumstances — names or the beginning of sentences — and almost never in sequences over one. Useless, arbitrary rules that seemed to cater to perfectionism over legibility.

When she complained, Josephine insisted this all the more reason she learn. True proficiency meant memorizing all the quirks and eccentricities of the written word. Playing too hard by the rules, she’d cautioned, would only serve to draw attention to the gaps in her education.

In spite of her stumbling, Josie was always ready with an eager compliment on her progress. How her penmanship had become smoother, almost elegant, despite the fact that it still took her three times as long as anyone else to write a paragraph. Or how her oral reading flowed, though she still stumbled on unfamiliar words and names.

“You’ll be ready to read bedtime stories to adorable orphans in no time,” Dorian had quipped as he walked by during her last lesson. She’d laughed, but tossed a book at him all the same. While Josephine was rather put out by the joke, Ellana didn’t mind his teasing. It provided a balance to the more blatant fawning.

It was not letters from Ferelden or Orlais that lay on her desk this night, nor many of the previous. Instead was a sheaf of papers drawn with horizontal lines, each one headed by a single, flowing letter of the Elvish alphabet. Guides Solas had made up for her months earlier to practice her cursive. And unlike learning Common, she’d only one option for Elvish language teacher and no resources other than the ones he created for her.

With all the excitement of the last few months, she’d let her Elvish studies fall by the wayside. Forgotten, until the venture through the Temple of Mythal reawakened her desire to connect to her roots.

Shemlen, the sentinel had called her. An insulting observation of her ignorance that she took far too personally for someone in her position. It left a deep cut. The Dalish were the keepers of memory after the Elvish diaspora. Her people worked tirelessly to preserve what wasn’t lost to wars with Tevinter, the Exhalted March and Alienages.

You know nothing of my people, she’d thought then. I am closest kin to the glory of our once-proud race. I am no Shemlen.

Oh, how much she’d learned since.

It was frustrating, this process. She could speak and understand far more of the tongue than she could read, and though Solas had cautioned her against trying to learn two languages at once she was determined to take them both on no matter the difficulty. Prove herself not just an honest
leader, but a learned one; beyond simply granting boons to the rich and powerful. To represent more than just the interests of the Chantry; to act as a voice for Elves both Alienage and Dalish. To be better. Not held back by superstition, or the archaic custom of hoarding knowledge among Keepers. With formal education, she could be a Herald of the people that was worth following.

Worth keeping.

Worth saving.

But at this rate she’d be dead before she learned to read a single chapter in a book of Elvish nursery rhymes.

If learning to read in Common was a lazy stream, Elvish was a slog through the mud.

It wasn’t supposed to be this hard. Elvish was supposed to come naturally. It was in her genes, in her bones, and yet eluded her.

In the Fade, Solas was able to manipulate her proficiency without her even knowing. As though she’d some switch hidden in her mind all this time — a direct connection to ancient knowledge that could be activated at will. If this could be done so easily in the Fade, surely the ability rest somewhere within her? Within all Elves? There must be something to be said for ancestral knowledge, and the keepers of eons of secrets.

Surely it could not be this difficult to recreate the practiced lines of Solas’ flawless cursive?

She could not possibly be so far removed from his — their, she corrected — people that this skill would continue to confound her.

I am no Shemlen.

A surge of anger lent enough tension to her wrist to nearly crack the tip of the quill when she pushed it to the page a little too hard. She swore softly, snatched the sheet she’d been working on from the desk and balled it up, tossing it somewhere over her shoulder. She took another blank piece from the pile on the corner of her desk and arranged it, staggered, over Solas’s guide so that the line of letters would peek out from beneath the new page. That way she could practice without destroying the original.

She dipped her quill into the ink pot and tapped it twice against the edge, then set to work again.

The first attempt on the new sheet was another mess of pooled ink and jerky, thick lines. Too slow, she chided herself; crossed it out and tried again. The second was more of the same. On the third line she remembered to rest her elbow on the table so her wrist would not tremble from the effort of keeping still.

There was only mild improvement.

Gritting her teeth, she gave up on copying the whole sheet and instead decided to focus on the same letter, written side-by-side, over and over again. With each one done, she challenged the next to come faster, fingers to press lighter; mimic the way Solas’ strokes transitioned from thick to thin and curled off so beautifully at the ends. She tried not to think about how every letter she wrote looked sloppy by comparison.

The Keepers of Dalish clans had all learned to read and write, and their Firsts following them when it was time to prepare for ascension. They were proud to inherit the gift of literacy; act as sole beneficiaries of ancient wisdom. To lord the skill above the rest of the clan, and remind them that
the tradition was sacred. Only the most wise and important of us would carry this knowledge. Only those worthy.

“I am no Shemlen,” she muttered aloud.

_No, you are different._

Loyalty to her clan would have never offered her this chance. In spite of their claims they would not have allowed her to discover their past, or share in its majesty. Solas was a living, breathing, relic of the lost empire and the sole reason she had the chance to learn its truths. He was willing to impart his knowledge.

Only because she was Elven.

Only because she wasn’t Elvhen.

Because she was both, and neither. Because she’d had the luck or misfortune to fall in love while embroiled in a war fuelled by religion, myth and legend. Sought the truth and found more than she’d bargained for in a lover.

The tip of the quill rest too long at the end of a letter and left an uneven stain that threatened to bleed through to Solas’ guide. With a grunt of frustration she balled it up, tearing it a little for good measure and tossed it over her shoulder. Another ball to join the rest, now more than 10 mounting by one corner of the room. She grabbed another blank sheet, and set to work again.

There was a quiet knock on her door.

Josephine always came by in the late evening to take back the pile of documents Ellana had made off with. But tonight she’d barely gotten through two over the hours she’d spent in her tower room, too focused on Solas’ damnable handwriting instead.

One large curve, a long line down, curl it inward. Make it thinner. Thicker in the middle. A dot here, a cross there, then join one letter to the next. Solas always added an extra curl at the end, though she did not know enough of her own language to tell if it was a legitimate part of the cursive or a flourish he’d added himself.

_We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path._

Another curl, another curve to follow. Down, up and across. Make her work look like his; like the work of an Elvhen hand.

She scoffed. It was difficult to say which was worse: to be placed upon a pedestal as the single being he had met in his travels worthy enough to learn the painful truths of her own people, or to be cast among the rest upon this plane, may they all be considered lowly equals.

And could she truly say she was any more than that? Try though she might she could not make herself any different from what she was born to be. No magic flowed in her veins, no ageless body would carry her through eternity, no floating castles and white spires awaited her at home. Only little camps of colourful painted aravels in forests hundreds of miles apart, and the stilted, butchered remnants of a language to call their own.

Her hand was rushed; quick, flickering movements of her wrist translated to thin scratches and inelegant swirls across the page. Repeating the same motions over and over again until she stopped paying attention to how they looked. Eyes unfocused upon the parchment, she was only barely attentive enough to know to move her hand down to the next line when she came to the end of the
previous one. The more her thoughts raced, the less she paid attention, and the more natural the movements became. Relying on muscle memory over hyper focus.

She didn’t stop until the sound of the quill tip dragging against the wooden desk startled her from the angry reverie. She’d reached the end of the page and not even realized; and in her carelessness, begun to scratch out a series of letters on the wood beneath. With a whispered curse, she reached for a nearby cloth and dabbed it on her tongue. Went to clean the fresh ink from the desk that almost certainly cost a small fortune, when something stilled her hand.

The letters looked… clean. More than that, they looked lovely.

Somehow she’d managed to fill the paper from edge to edge with sweeping curls and confident lines and not even noticed. Even continued onto the desk without faltering.

It wasn’t as skilled as Solas’ guides, but it was the first approximation she’d achieved that did not look like it was writ by the hand of a trembling child.

There was even a flourish on the end.

She lifted the parchment off the desk to get a better look at the finished work — admire her skill — and a blackened thumbprint on one corner caught her eye. The mark had smudged several of the better writ letters across the bottom, obscuring them completely. She quickly put the paper back down, loath to risk a single blemish on the finished page, and picked up the still-wet quill to return to its glass pot.

Again she reached for the folded cloth.

… And caught her wrist upon the feathered tip of the quill’s plume, upending the bottle it sat in.

Thick, black ink splattered across the desk in ribbons, hitting the stack of Josephine’s unfinished letters and several of the books that were scattered about. But beyond that, the worst lay before her; the record of her hard-won accomplishments slowly disappearing beneath a seeping puddle of ichor.

She stared agape in silent fury at the destruction — hours of work, wasted — felt a tide of anger and frustration build up until it bubbled over. With a roar, she grabbed the fallen ink pot and hurled it at the wall, where it broke with a satisfying crash. Leaving shards of blackened glass in a pile on the floor. If she could not reap the satisfaction of her hard work, she would at least have the pleasure of destroying that which took it from her.

The impact was immediately followed by a startled gasp from the direction of the stairwell. Turning, Ellana found not Josephine, but Solas, standing on the topmost step. His eyes cast upon the mess of ink and glass before him, studying it only a moment before turning a curious gaze to her, brows high on his forehead. An unspoken question on parted lips.

“It spilled,” she provided, rather lamely. Then again, “I spilled it,” gesturing to her ruined work. Stammering out her excuses. “I was— it—” A flush crept into her face, hot and ashamed, and she turned away. Embarrassed to have been caught throwing things around her room like an ornery child. She cleared her throat; bit an angry, “What do you want?” at him to cover her shame.

The harsh edge of her tone made her wince; she hadn’t intended to sound quite so cold. Though loath to admit it, her heart leapt at the sight of him. A little light of hope that he’d come to make things better. Somehow. And they’d go back to how it was between bitter break-up and righteous anger, in the brief few weeks of stolen kisses and secret glances where things weren’t quite so
terribly complicated. Despite it all she loved him, and quietly nurtured the part of her that was foolish enough to believe that alone would carry them through.

He didn’t answer right away. Instead respectfully averted his gaze from her reddened cheeks and bent to collect the glass by his feet. The shattered bottle left behind no more than a handful of jagged shards. In silence he swept them into his palm, then walked to the writing desk and deposited the remains into the wastepaper basket by Ellana’s side. After, he pulled a folded handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the wet ink from his fingertips.

“I’m sorry if I surprised you,” he said quietly. “I knocked, but you did not answer. I wasn’t sure if you had heard me.” He offered her the kerchief, eyeing the stain on her palm from grasping the upturned bottle.

She took it. “I thought it was Josephine.”

They lapsed into painful silence. Solas watching her stubbornly work at the stains on her skin, more spreading the mess around than cleaning it. When the task proved fruitless and her frustration got the better of her, she balled up the little cloth and threw it onto the table with the rest of the mess. Made angrier still for its soft landing, crumpled and useless like everything else. The kerchief settled on the one side of the sheet that had yet to soak through with ink, the movement drawing Solas’ eye to the work.

Slow and cautious, as though afraid she might snap at his hand should he move too sudden, Solas moved it off the ruined parchment. Turned his head to line up with the angle of the guidelines. Ellana watched his eyes scan the paper — reading over what remained of her lines of cursive — and felt an uncomfortable mix of anticipation and self-consciousness. Awaiting his assessment like an anxious pupil. Studying the line of his brow for the weight of disapproval or a subtle turn of his mouth for appreciation.

He offered neither. Only a soft hum and a quick flicker of his eyes to hers and back. “The lines were impressive,” he noted. There was such gentleness in his voice that it made the compliment sound more intimate than a simple appraisal of her skill. “Your penmanship has improved considerably since last I saw it.”

But it sounded sincere, and so, “Thank you,” she replied.

They slipped into another uncomfortable silence, a pattern that Ellana was determined not to keep repeating. She broke it with a pointed, “What did you want?” in the same instant that Solas began, “I would like to—”.

Both stopped. Waited for the other to continue. And when neither took the opportunity, Ellana gestured toward Solas with an open palm, inviting him to finish. He shifted uncomfortably, and tried again. “I would like to show you something, if you’ll allow me.”

Unmoved, she countered, “What is it?”

“It is…” he began, pausing for thought, “not something easily described.”

“Vague as ever, Solas,” Ellana replied dryly. It was far past the time for the clever games he so often played.

He tipped his head downward a little. Folded his hands behind his back. “My apologies, that was not my intention. It is only that you have no frame of reference for such a thing; any description I could offer you would only lead to further questions. Ones best answered, I would think, by joining
me. It is a repository, of sorts. A library.”

One brow lifted. “A library? Do we not already have one?” The reply was laden with sarcasm that he did not seem to pick up on.

“Ah,” he stumbled, “Here, yes. This one requires some travel to reach. Through the Eluvian Lady Morrigan keeps in the room off the courtyard.”

Cautious, she considered the proposition and what possible motive was laid behind it. He did not often share such things unprompted, and given the result of their last foray into Elvish memory, she felt she’d earned some trepidation. With all the anger and sorrow she still clung to, she had half a mind to refuse him on principal alone. Had intended to, until he added, “It is a place from my own time, which still stands today.”

In spite of everything, her curiosity was piqued. And truly, she had no want to argue. The promise of an ancient relic was enough to make her put aside her hubris. For the moment, at least.

She stood, wiping her stained hands on her pants. “Alright,” she said. “Show me.”

*  

The courtyards were always empty in the late evening. What made up the skeleton crew of men and women on night watch were posted along the ramparts, evenly spaced between towers with crossbows in hand. Watchful gaze turned upon the mountain paths at the front and rear of the fortress, searching for signs of encampments or would-be intruders. Those few assigned to guard the interior were rarely found beyond the main doors. Leaning on the walls when no one was looking to ease the load of heavy plate armour on tired bones. Oft left bored by uneventful shifts, they paid no mind to the rare passers-by in the halls at night. With the kitchen closed and most of the castle’s populace in bed, it was rare to encounter anyone other than a wandering insomniac or midnight snacker looking to raid the unlocked pantry.

While such behavior was usually discouraged, the guards often joined them and so politely ignored it.

No one was assigned to the interior courtyard past late evening. Surrounded on all sides by high walls, bedrooms, and storage made it inherently more secure than the outer yards; it saw little activity beyond a patrol of two that passed through a few times a night. And because only the advisors and Inquisitor herself knew of the existence of Morrigan’s Eluvian no additional security measures were placed to protect it. Just a wooden door with a simple lock. The thought being that anything more complex might arouse suspicion — and though Leliana ran a tight ship between aggressive vetting and her network of spies, one could never be too careful when it came to the storage of such an artifact.

Solas and Ellana made their way to the garden without incident. Passing only one guard as they exited the main hall. He nodded respectfully — disinterested — it was not yet so late that a walk about the grounds with a friend could be considered unusual. Once out of the couple’s eyesight, he surreptitiously returned his attention to a book he had secreted away in his armour.

The garden smelled of sweet spring flowers; roses and jasmine. Night blooms heralding the end of spring, with only a crisp breeze blowing in from snow-capped mountains to remind them of the harsh winter that came before. A single lantern hung in the centre of the yard, its wick burned to a low flicker, but it was the light of the waxing moon amid a shower of stars that drew long shadows on the ground.
All things considered, it was a beautiful evening. Mild and quiet. The sort of setting one takes a lover to. A romantic stroll for sharing whispered words and fevered kisses. Quick fingers seeking bare skin to warm each other with the promise of a tryst. It was a thought that made Ellana that much more uncomfortable.

Their presence felt… awkward. Having struck some strange balance between lovers and not. A relationship too new to have yet built the foundation of time and trust needed to assure that an obstacle caused only temporary strain. In this state of limbo, she was hyperaware of every glance, sigh and sound. Every accidental brush of his hand as he walked beside her. How easily they fell in step, and how close they pressed. The way his hand twitched when she rubbed her shoulders to block the chill. Too near, yet not near enough.

When they came to the storeroom door, Solas took a step ahead and removed the lock from its hinge. Holding it in his palm as he flipped the latch open. Careful not to move too quickly, lest the sound of the creaking door carry far enough to attract attention.

“It was unlocked?” Ellana queried, eyeing him as he pushed the door wide.

“I came by earlier,” he replied, choosing not to elaborate further. The statement raised a number of questions, first and foremost how he would have gained access to the keys that only Leliana and Morrigan possessed. And without their notice. She had doubts that magic — even advanced spells — could unlock a door. But ultimately she decided to let it lie; the detail felt unimportant before the promise of ancient secrets and conscious walks in the places between the Fade and waking world.

Once inside, Solas put the padlock in his pocket and pulled the door closed. Then raised two fingers and drew a half-circle in the air. The act conjured a complicated series of interwoven circles and lines that glowed upon the wooden surface and disappeared a second later. When he turned around, Ellana had him pinned with a questioning look.

His answers came much more easily now than they had before. “A minor illusion, and ward,” he offered. “To an observer it will appear the lock remained untouched, and the door will be difficult to open if tried. The ward will alert me should someone attempt to tamper with the spell. We would do well not to raise the suspicion that someone may have learned of, and tried to gain access to, the Eluvian.”

She nodded. Murmured quietly, “Smart.” Then was struck with another thought. “How did you come to know it was here?”

“Aside from being able to sense the aura of the artifact?” he countered. That should have been obvious. “It was brought in by several men directly beneath the room where I sleep. It would have been difficult not to notice.” There was the first hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. A twitch, and a curl. The first she’d seen in days. She could not help but return it.

It took much less effort for Solas to activate the Eluvian than Morrigan, she noted. Requiring a movement that could barely be called a wave of his hand, performed almost absently, compared to the witch’s aggressive two-handed thrust. She had forced the mirror open like a strong wind rattles a barn door, where he gave no more than a light push. Regardless, it blazed to life just the same, filling the small room with a bright blast of light and a crack as the magical barrier broke open. Once the surface had calmed to a gentle roll, Solas gave Ellana a nod and stepped forward. She followed on his heels.

The mirror’s surface clung to her skin when she emerged from the other side. An odd sensation conjuring images of soap bubbles; tension peeling away from wet fingers. Childhood memories of
the way she used to play in the washing tub instead of doing the chores she’d been assigned. The first breath she took on the other side felt clear and light, filling her with a strange sense of relief. As though she’d had a weight on her chest and not known it until this moment. She’d noticed the feeling the first time she’d come as well, with Morrigan. Though she’d not thought to mention it then, too enraptured with the discovery of the spaces between.

Solas was waiting for her off to one side. Nodded his acknowledgment once she stepped free of the mirror, and then gestured for her to follow him down one of the paths between the darkened Eluvians.

She kept pace with him, but only barely. Finding herself easily distracted by their surroundings; an environment that was at once alien and familiar. Not unlike the way it felt to visit the memory of Skyhold in the dream Solas had crafted for her. But it was more than just the fact she’d been here once before.

This place drew her.

Called.

Shook loose some spark hidden deep in her chest that was nurtured by the very act of moving along the crumbling walkways. Despite the desolate landscape of shrouded fog, and the distant horizon fading into infinity, it gave her a sense of comfort to be here.

“What did you call this place?” she asked after a time. Knowing it only by the no-doubt-incorrect title Morrigan had come up with.

“Bel viren,” Solas replied in melodic Elvish. “It means—”

But Ellana supplied the answer for him, “Many paths.”

That awarded her another smile. “Yes,” he affirmed. Carefully manouevring over the remains of a shattered mirror, and the broken stones that had reclaimed it. Explaining as he walked. “Once, there were many of these places. They acted as a nexus: connecting cities, homes, locations of import or repositories of memory. We rarely travelled outside them; often only for a hunt or to explore. They were often full of travellers, particularly in times of important events or ceremony.” With wistful sadness, he added, “It was rare to see them sparsely populated, let alone empty.”

Presently, they passed a pair of tilted Eluvians that stood out amid the neat rows of their brethren. The mirrors supported each other by precarious balance of angle and broken stonework. One appeared to be melting into the other, one corner missing where it met with the surface of its twin. Both were long dark, shattered, and surrounded by coils of petrified vines. Cracked stone skin scattered with thorns and strange leaves. It gave way to dust when Ellana stepped on it.

Strange remnants of a once-living crossroads, now nothing but gravestones and old bones.

They travelled for what seemed like hours, largely in silence. Solas leading one step ahead, guided either by strength of purpose or clarity of ancient memory. He strode down the twisted, dizzying paths with confidence, and rarely stopped to find his bearings, while she could not tell the difference from one area to the next until their surroundings began to change.

The further they walked, the more the environment shifted from dreary grey and broken stone, to soft earth and bare trees. Not long after, Ellana spied the first breath of life she’d seen since they arrived: a soft, baby pink blossom growing on the end of a twisted branch. Beyond it stood a sapling with half a dozen. After another quarter hour spent travelling, the trees around them sported
hundreds.

In contrast, the path they’d followed from the Eluvian had become fragmented. Broken. As though what powers sustained this place could only support one or the other: beauty or stability. It was brighter here and more vibrant, but travel had become treacherous. This deep into the crossroads their surroundings were a patchwork of floating dirt paths, carved stairs, fragments of ancient structures and perilous edges that threatened to drop them into an infinite well of clouds and sky. The setting had become a beguiling, twisted landscape; it was as though someone had reached through each Eluvian and taken a handful of what lay beyond to pull into this plane. Stitched them all together in a piece-meal approximation of ancient Elvhen realms.

Through it all was the distant roar of rushing water. Quiet at first, growing louder the more displaced the environment became. Soon they passed pools of stagnant water dotted with petals fallen from the trees, then lazy streams that gave way to churning rapids and waterfalls that cut through the jigsaw of stonework, disappearing somewhere below them.

When they passed a river that flowed upward into the sky Ellana was moved to stop and stare. Solas was 30 paces ahead before he noticed, turned round and came back to join her. Following her gaze to the impossible waterfall.

“What happened here?” she asked, unable to tear her eyes from the spectacle. “Is this because of the Veil?”

“Mostly, yes,” answered Solas. “These spaces do not occur naturally. They were constructed for the convenience of the Elvhen people by means of powerful magic. As neither waking nor dreaming, their existence relied on the flow of magic between these planes. Once the Veil was raised, and that flow stymied, there was no means to support it. Over millennia, they have deteriorated. Some areas, like that which we first entered, have withstood remarkably well. I imagine due to the fact that so many Eluvians were placed there, and continued to be used for some time before being lost or destroyed. Other areas, like this one, hold only a few remaining mirrors that lead to other constructed planes. With no firm hold on the waking world, they’ve become… confused. The barriers between the constructed planes weaken, and eventually disappear. What was held within them begins to spill into this middle realm. Ultimately, it will all collapse upon itself.

“There—” He took hold of her shoulder in one hand, and pointed to a floating island with the other. “—do you see part of a room over there? The floor is made from another structure. They are not from the same building, but have merged together through the collapsing of the boundaries between the spaces they occupied.”

Ellana followed his direction to the strange little room in the distance. Blown apart with walls standing askew, platforms and windows from other places jutting out at all angles. Water flowed from an open window, pooled in the centre of the room and disappeared somewhere else. Never quite collecting enough to overflow.

Behind them came a sudden crack, loud as a thunderbolt and far too close for comfort. Ellana spun round, searching for the origin, but found only the same scatter of the floating islands and pieces of buildings that surrounded them. Then, on closer inspection, she saw the source: a chunk of the stone wall to their right had broken off. But instead of falling to the ground it simply began to float away. Slowly spinning in place.

Curious, she picked up a small stone from near her feet and lobbed it at the debris. But in spite of the power she put into the throw, its speed slowed to a crawl just before impact. Stopping just short of hitting it. It floated, still, as though placed by divine hand. Frozen in some pocket of space where
neither time nor gravity had an effect.

Perhaps being drawn to this place was not as harmless a compulsion as she’d originally thought.

Solas’ fingers touched on the small of her back, just for a second, before he pulled his hand away. “Come,” he said. “We’re almost there.”

*

The Eluvian they found at the end of their journey was larger than the others. Its surface rolling and churning with active magic. A door that had never quite been closed. It stood, ageless and simmering with quiet power, begging their entry.

Around it were piles of books. Torn, cracked and bent, though a scattered few seemed to have remained untouched by the force that split the sky. Here, it seemed even the most ancient detritus was spared the rot and decay that centuries of exposure would normally have wrought. However, the books that survived offered no hint of what secrets they contained; their spines blank, covers wrapped in fabric or cured leather. No titles nor authors. Not even a single Elvish rune. Similar, she thought, to the book of old stories she’d found on Solas’ desk when this all began.

A few were stacked in small piles off to one side, presumably to clear a path to the Eluvian they stood before. Though most were scattered about, face down with pages curled, as though thrown outward from the mirror by a great blast of wind or magic. Skidding along the dirt path in all directions and gathering in corners like paper cobwebs.

Solas seemed unmoved by the scene, and she followed his lead. As dangerous as it appeared she trusted he would not blindly lead her into peril.

He made to walk through the mirror ahead of her, but thought better of it and offered a hand for Ellana to hold. She took it without hesitation, and allowed herself to be pulled through.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sight that lay beyond.

Her bared feet touched upon a marble floor; it was the first thing she was aware of once she emerged on the other side. Smooth, yet warm to the touch. Sensation that begged her toes to curl. The environment was pleasantly warm. Torches and fireplace alike sported blazing flame, as though lit mere moments before in anticipation of their arrival. The wood and oil that sustained them still full, untouched, and she wondered if the fire even required fuel at all.

She was surrounded on three sides by towering shelves filled with books, far taller than she could reach though she saw no ladders to assist. Small piles of the mysterious tomes they held clustered on the floor near the edges of the walls, laying still where they’d fallen centuries before. Where a fourth wall should have been, there was nothing but a gaping hole. Through which she saw more floating islands, statuary, bits of paths and endless sky. Above her, in the distance, was a similar court filled with the same bookshelves and decor, floating upside-down. And before her, a path of broken stones and stairs that invited her further into the realm.

It was larger, and more beautiful, than any ruin she had ever seen. Earth tones and stone walls blended seamlessly to create stunning patterns on ceiling and floors. By the wall stood tables and chairs crafted by the hand of one whose technique was lost to ages. In the centre of the upside-down courtyard was a fountain of flowing water that ran from the spout of a carved statue. Somehow unaffected by the inversion.

Awe-struck and overwhelmed by the grandeur she made her way forward, out beyond the confines
of the three-walled room they’d entered. Feet moving on their own volition, carrying her down a path that led to a crumbling archway. She passed a wood-carved table that stood next to the last shelves in the room. It held an array of books, stones, and — most disturbingly — a partial skeleton. The remains of its arms held outward, clinging to the polished surface while hip and leg bones gathered in a pile beneath. Its skull turned to one side, jaw crooked and agape in silent wail. Empty sockets seemed to follow her as she walked.

A chilling reminder of what tragedy was dealt to those who lived in Solas’ time.

Morbid curiosity nearly made her stop to investigate it further, but superstition won out in the end. Her outstretched fingers stilled, hovering just above the bone, before recoiling.

*Leave the dead where they lie.*

Ahead, beyond the remains of the path she was upon, was another room. Larger — much larger — and adorned with artworks and supplicating statues of eagles, dragons, bears and wolves. Images of worship to placate a disdainful pantheon of pretender-gods. They were carved of dark stone. Or — no — gold? Light glinted off the surface of wings, paws and talons, casting a warm glow upon the shelves that surrounded them.

With her eyes locked on the majesty in the distance, she did not notice the spirit until it greeted her.

“*Andaran atish’an mithadra Elvhen,*” said a soft, feminine voice.

Startled, Ellana spun round and instinctively reached for the bow at her back, only to find nothing there. It had been left in the tower bedroom at Skyhold; she’d been under the impression they would not encounter anything on their journey. With a sharp curse, she stumbled backward a few steps and took a defensive stance near a rock wall.

But the spirit made no move to pursue her. If anything, it seemed bound to the location it appeared upon. Translucent body floating in place, flickering like a candle, waiting patiently for... something. A returned greeting, or perhaps a question? She’d never seen a spirit quite like this one; neither aggressive nor curious. It was as much intriguing as unsettling. Faceless and formless, its body was little more than smokey outline of chest and arms. Palms held outstretched in welcome, blank face turned toward her. It bobbed up and down, silent and expectant.

It had greeted her in Elvish, she realized belatedly, suggesting that it might await her answer in the same. She took a single step toward it, wet her lips and, “*A-andaran atish’an,*” she returned with a nod of respect. Nervous tongue catching on the words.

The spirit did not respond.

Solas stepped forward in her place — she’d nearly forgotten he was there — and held up a hand. “*Atisha, Ghil’Dirthalen,*” he greeted the spirit softly. It replied in kind, and what they said beyond that was lost to Ellana. A fluent stream of ancient Elvish she couldn’t possibly keep up with. She caught only a word here or there amid the short exchange. The most notable of which was, ‘*Speak*’ and, ‘*Friend*’.

A moment later the spirit answered Solas in unaccented Common, “Honoured Elvhen, I will speak so your guest will understand.” It turned in place, facing Ellana once more. “I am Ghil’Dirthalen: ‘one who guides seekers of knowledge true’. I am Study.”

She passed an uneasy glance between it and Solas, unsure of how to proceed. No spirit she’d ever encountered possessed the power of speech with such clarity — or any speech at all, really. And
though Solas had often talked of intelligent spirits that mingled freely with the Elven people, Cole remained the only ‘living’ example she’d seen of such a thing. And this ‘Study’ had far less cohesion than he, it seemed.

Solas gave her a nod. “This is the Vir Dirthara,” he explained. Sweeping an arm wide to encompass all within their view. “A repository of Elven wisdom and memory, both past and present. What remains here is the lived experience of those who witnessed the rise and fall of Elvhenan.” He gestured to the spirit. “Study and its kin were the curators of that knowledge. They are keen to share it, as was the purpose that drove them to first inhabit this place.”

“This is a connecting place,” offered Study eagerly, adding, “I knew all, once. Now broken; only fragments or knowledge new, since the fall.” It paused, sputtering for a moment as if stuck on a reply. Its form flaring and fading in turns. Finally it stabilized. “Apologies. Apologies, I will try to answer your questions to the best of my ability.”

“I…” Ellana hesitated, glancing again to Solas for guidance. Of course she had questions — too many to count — but to stand before a spirit of Study in this ancient, undiscovered place was overwhelming. Each time she reached for some curiosity, her tongue stumbled over the words and she’d find herself struck dumb by her circumstance. Eventually she managed to sputter out a clumsy, “How do we get to the main room?” and gestured to the covered courtyard floating beyond the path. It was further away than she originally thought; at least 300 paces if not more. And between them was a sheer drop into the void below.

If Study was offended by the query it did not show it, replying with a matter-of-fact, “Raise the paths.” As if the answer were so obvious.

When she looked again to Solas for clarification, she found he was already headed toward a wayward pile of stone bricks and large, flat rocks. Descending a hidden staircase down toward the remnants of another Eluvian, where he had a better view of the chasm they needed to bridge.

He raised a palm upward, fingers curled, and levitated one of the large standing stones. Fist and rock glowed a faint blue as he directed it from the lower platform where he stood, to the space where the path they’d taken had crumbled into nothing. Once satisfied with its position, he reached for another, then another after that, and so on until the first half of the chasm was crossable.

The spells he cast seemed effortless here; more so than when she saw him on the battlefield. While he was much more powerful than most mages she’d encountered, he still relied heavily on his staff to channel and direct the magic he wielded. It was rare she saw him cast without it, and even then only small spells. Fire to light a torch, or a chill to douse. Nothing so grand as a flick of the wrist to casually reshape the earth and rubble to carve a stable path for them to cross. Such feats required lyrium potions and powerful staves enchanted with runes and gems.

Study’s voice pulled Ellana from her reverie. “Know what has not been lost.”

She blinked, turning to the spirit. “I’m sorry?”

“Know this,” it continued, oblivious to her confusion in its excitement to speak with another, “Many were trapped here when the material and Fade were sundered. Paths broke. I preserve their last words. Do you wish to hear them?”

Ellana considered the request. Morbid, surely — but her curiosity got the better of her. And so, hesitantly, “Alright,” she replied.

The spirit’s once pleasant, melodic voice turned shrill. Angry, and afraid. “’How could the Dread
Wolf cast a Veil between the world that wakes and the world that dreams?’

‘The Evanuris will send people! They will save us!’

‘What is this Veil? What has Fen’Harel done?’

‘I will end him.’

‘What happened? Where are the paths? Where are the paths? Gods save me, the floor is gone. Do not let me fall. Do not let me—’ And abruptly, it quieted. Allowing the silence to stretch on just long enough to feel dreadfully ominous. “On this spot, that is all.”

The revelation chilled her to her bone.

Voices of the dying. The long dead and long forgotten from thousands of years before history was written. Trapped by curse of circumstance in this shattered construct and sentenced to live their last moments in fear. In anger. In betrayal. Collateral damage from a desperate act that both saved and doomed the rest of their people.

How many had been here when the Veil rose?

How long did it take them to waste away?

It was then that she noticed another pile of bones beyond the spirit. Mixed up with broken stone. Several ribs curled out from beneath the rubble, along with part of a skull. The back of it was crushed, pressed flat against the ground beneath as though it had fallen from a great height and been shattered by the impact.

Do not let me fall.

It was a wonder, she thought, that the last moments of the dying had not attracted more malevolent spirits to this place. For all the wonder and promise it offered to its ancient visitors, it would be remembered as a graveyard.

A hand touched her shoulder.

The sudden contact giving her such a start that she jumped. Pressing an open palm to her mouth to catch the choked gasp she gave as she spun round to face Solas. His eyes slipped from hers, to the spirit behind her, the bones on the ground, and back. “I’ve repaired the path,” he said. “We can reach the main room. It is home to most of the tomes this place holds.”

As grateful as she was for the distraction, there was an immediate problem with his idea. “I would love to see them but I can barely read Elvish, Solas. Unless they’re made for children I doubt I could enjoy them the way you do.”

“You do not need to read to understand. The tomes here are not like those you’d find in libraries across Thedas today. They are…” he paused to consider his words, frowning. “It would be easier to show you. Come.”

Moments later they stood before one of the larger shelves. Packed end to end with books of all shapes and sizes. Solas walked along the rows, searching. Fingertips barely brushing the spines; a touch soft and delicate as though he were caressing an old lover. In that moment, it was not hard to see how he belonged there. A man out of time, at home in this place between present and past.

He pulled one of the books out by its spine, flipped the cover open and scanned the pages. Then,
apparently satisfied with his choice, he offered it to Ellana. She took it, but regarded him with open skepticism. With her studies still in their infancy her ability to read Elvish was severely limited at best; a novel of this size was far beyond her skillset. Yet, Solas was watching her expectantly. Waiting for what would surely be an embarrassing attempt to read it.

But she chose to give him the benefit of the doubt; cradled the tome in one hand, and opened the cover.

Walking amidst a group of Elves packed into a tight hallway he pushes forward. Manoeuvring gently past some but outright shoving those that do not step aside when he politely asks. It is dark and musty. The mage lights in the ceiling provide poor lighting and he’s relying on the path of those in front of him to ensure he does not get lost in the twists and turns.

Finally, he reaches the mouth of the colosseum, and the sight before him is just as he’d imagined. Thousands are already here, with thousands more still pouring in from each of the dozen entrances. The size, impossibly huge — seats filling rapidly with other Elves come to watch the festivities. Most do not seem near as excited as he; it is likely they have seen the display a hundred times. But he is young, and new, and has not had the opportunity to attend lavish balls and ceremony.

The air is crisp and warm, the sky painted with reds and golds as the sun begins to set, and he can smell the food and drink wafting in the air. Hear the anxious murmur of thousands. See the faces of all that surround him.

He does not find a seat, instead stays pressed against the rails that separate the performers from the audience. Rapt with attention. Ready to stay hours, months, years; an entire lifetime would not be enough to take in all the wonder of—

Ellana was torn out of the scene by the sound of the cover flipping shut. Thrust violently back into awareness as though she’d been asleep for hours and lost in a deep dream. Her vision swam, eventually focusing on Solas’ hand where it rest atop the book still held between her own. Holding the cover in place. The experience happened so fast, and with such intensity, that she was left dizzied and confused. For the first few seconds she couldn’t quite remember where she was or how she’d managed to get there.

Vertigo made her take a clumsy step backward, stumble, and find her bearings with the help of Solas’ firm grip on her shoulders. She blinked up at him, bewildered. “What on— what the fuck was that?”

He hid a smile in pursed lips. Coughed to cover a laugh. “That was one of the many tomes you’ll find in this place,” he answered. “They are memories. Experiences. That one is of a young man attending his first festival with his family.”

“Are they all like this?” Ellana asked, eyes wide.

He nodded, his smile growing. “Yes, for the most part.”

She could not hide her growing excitement. “How long do we have here before dawn?”

“As long as you like,” Solas replied. “Here, time does not pass the way it does in the material plane. This is a construct; you could spend days and be gone mere hours. Though I would not recommend it. Exhaustion will catch up to you long before that.”

The admission successfully quelled any lingering doubts she had about the books. Bursting with
curiosity, and free to explore the library at her leisure, Ellana burned through the shelves around her. Taking down book after book to experience. Running her fingers along the paper and ink to lose herself in the pages. While she did not understand much of what she experienced, the emotional impact alone made it worth any confusion.

War, joy, grief, art, family and foe; memories both enthralling and mundane.

Maps, roads, poetry and philosophy.

From long forgotten ancestors a trove of wonder was left behind. One not even Thedas’ most accomplished scholars of Elvish lore could ever have dreamed to find. All the pride and folly of the Elvhen people, before the collapse of their society, and she alone standing in the ruins of their greatest library to rediscover it.

Each book assaulted her senses with a flurry of images, sensation, smells and sounds; as though by simply glancing at the pages the experience itself was imprinted upon her own memory. Some were disconnected and difficult to discern, like that of some sort of theatre where people came and left at will while spirits imparted knowledge and experience. A school, perhaps. The memories were fragments made up by the thousands of elves who had come and gone during the time this particular spirit was present, and when they all came at her at once it was impossible to separate them into something coherent and linear.

Others were much sharper. Like that she found in a book containing the memory of two young children running over hills and fields to chase a playful spirit. It left her heart pounding and breath shallow, with an irresistible urge to do the same.

She glanced over her shoulder and found Solas leafing through a book of his own, leaning his back against the shelf. He seemed largely unaffected by comparison. His expression changing only slightly as he read; a twitch of his lip or pull of his brow, but nothing near so intense as what she felt.

*It must be easier,* she thought, *clearer.* The books were created by and for Elvhen, and she was not attuned to magic the way he was. Perhaps ease came with literacy.

Turning, she pulled another from the shelf. A moderately sized book with a deep red cover that seemed to exude a sense of intensity even before she even opened it. She slipped a finger between two pages at random, and began to read.

*They come together as lovers in a fiery embrace; rolling and twisting, burning hot and endless. So lost that nothing else can exist around them. Only promises, and whispered words. Oaths and praises. Heat betwixt thighs, in bellies and on breath. Bodies shifting to accommodate each other, to bring the greatest pleasure and the wildest passion. Peaks and valleys, breath and sigh, years lost to love without a thought for what lay beyond the boundaries of their beds. Alive, in love, with no obligations but to each other.*

In her surprise, she dropped the book. It landed with a clap, open and face down upon the floor. She pressed a palm to her chest and felt the pounding of her heart beneath it, and the warmth of a guilty flush upon her skin. She stared at the tome and it’s crumpled pages, and at once felt both unsettled and terribly curious about what the rest of it might hold.

The sudden gasp had caught Solas’ attention. He was looking at her with brows raised in inquiry, but the shock of the experience had left her momentarily too stunned to supply an answer to the obvious question.
Taking her silence as invitation, Solas approached and bent to retrieve the book at her feet. As he stood, he turned it over in his hands and glanced at the pages. “Ah,” he commented, and closed it. The knowing curl of his lip as he handed the book back to her brought the flush into the apples of her cheeks.

She cleared her throat, joking, “Is this the Elvhen equivalent of erotica?”

“More like voyeurism,” he quipped, the smile growing playful. “I’m sure there were many others.”

“Books, or readers to enjoy it?”

He smirked. “Both, I imagine.”

Rather than risk embarrassing herself any further, she merely hummed a reply, and ran a thumb along the book’s textured cover before replacing it upon the shelf above her. A little regretfully. When she turned back, Solas was already taking down another tome to peruse, gratefully choosing not to call any more attention to her fluster. Still, her interest was piqued, and with this taste of the experience of lovers in Elvhenan, a question nagged at her persistently enough to give it voice.

She cleared her throat to get his attention. “Was it always like that?”

Solas glanced up from the tome he’d chosen. “Was what always like that?”

“Love,” she answered, her inquisitive spirit lending her the confidence not to falter. “Sex. Was it always such an experience?”

She’d expected him to be put off by her question, given his penchant for modesty and the shaky ground they were on, but instead he seemed surprisingly receptive to her broaching the topic. Perhaps happy just to share the knowledge.

He tilted his head in thought before offering her a tactful reply, “It could be,” he said. “It was—” Pausing, he turned the words over in his mind. Considering the potential implications of what answer he gave and how it might reflect upon their experiences. “Different.

“Sex between lovers was not the same as that between two individuals who desired little more than a passing encounter, nor that for the purposes of procreation.”

“How so?”

He closed his tome and tucked it under an arm, giving her his full attention. “When choosing to create a child a pair must shift focus away from simply the experience of each other, and toward the interests of new life. It requires a level of vulnerability, desire and familiarity between the pair that would not be present in another situation. While not less enjoyable, the direction and impact of that experience is felt differently. One cannot be compared to the other.”

Ellana folded her arms, countering with a flippant, “So which was the best?”

The sheer gall of the question rewarded her with a little quirk of his mouth in the pause before he answered. “That between lovers.”

“How romantic,” she remarked, her tone touched by a note of good-natured sarcasm. “For any particular reason or simply because it was poetic?”

“How Connection,” he replied simply. A single raised brow queried him for a more detailed explanation. He placed the tome under his arm upon a nearby stack of books to free both hands,
and then held them out before him, palms facing his chest, and touched his fingertips together. “The deeper the bond between lovers, the easier it is to share sensation; to stoke or sate desire.” Slowly, he slid his hands together. Fingers entwining until they rested against the back of opposite hands. “To put it simply, a pair in love have a deeper connection to each other than that of ones merely infatuated, and so are able to use that connection to manipulate the magic within each other in a way that others cannot.”

She frowned, blurting out, “But I am not a mage,” before she could think better of it. It was impossible not to draw upon the experience of their first night together, and she was left rather baffled by the implications of his use of the spell. Not so much because he was able to heighten her pleasure when they were intimate, but that she was able to feel his own.

He gave her a pointed look. “You do not need to be proficient in magic to feel its effects.”

It was a fair point.

“Additionally, you are an Elf; magical affinity is in your nature. The fact that you have not used magic in the past does not prevent you from doing so in the future.” He gestured to her marked hand. “Using the anchor to close rifts may not take the form of a cast spell, but it is a use of magic nonetheless, and requires some skill to learn. To manipulate it, you must be aware of its existence within you, and direct it toward a target — in most cases, a rift — at will.”

Ellana’s gaze fell to her palm, considering his words as she turned her hand back and forth. The explanation made sense in theory, but she felt no different for it. The mark seemed to act on its own accord; there was no forethought, no conscious summoning of power involved in the act of closing rifts. She merely raised her hand and it happened. All by itself. When the rift was gone, the anchor returned to its inert state until she happened across another.

Furthermore, the mark regularly caused her pain from the sputters and sparks it threw out when she was in the vicinity of demons or strong magic. One would think that if she had even a modicum of control over it her want to soothe the pain caused by those encounters would have some notable impact on it. Instead, she was no better at wielding the thing now than she was when she first awoke in the Chantry dungeon.

*Mages are trained in magical use for years in the Circles,* she mused, *perhaps with similar time to study I could come to understand it better.*

But…

“You said that, in the end, the mark would consume me,” she said quietly.

His face fell, and in his woe he offered only a reluctant, “Yes,” as reply.

Her fingers curled into a fist, and held. Nails digging crescents into her palm until the bite of pain overpowered the thrum of energy she’d felt in her arm since first stepping foot into the crossroads. The Fade granted her a heightened awareness of the magic that cursed her skin, but offered no more ability to use it than she had in the material plane. Even here in a realm crafted by the same ancient magic that flowed through her veins she was given nothing.

No greater understanding, no brilliant insight into her magical kin, or connection to the gifts they wielded with such ease.

That Solas wielded with such ease.

And there was no time to find it; not the way she could have were she his kin.
For the first time, she felt the weight of her own mortality as an anchor, and it frightened her. A sudden awareness of how short and insignificant her life would be compared to those who once walked these halls. There would never be enough time, and everything she’d experienced since leaving her people had only accelerated what little she had left.

She did not notice Solas move closer to her until his hands had slipped around her own, cradling her fist between them. Fingertips tracing a path over blanched knuckles and pulling gently, urging her to open for him. When she obliged, a warm light blossomed from his palms, and sank into the marks she’d left in her skin. They disappeared at once, leaving no trace behind. Not even the comforting pinch of pain the injury had offered her.

“I will do everything in my power to prevent any further harm from coming to you,” he began solemnly. Admitting, “Though I cannot take back that which I have already caused.” He reached up to tuck an errant curl behind her ear, his touch lingering on her neck for just a few seconds too long to be seen as innocent. Though she did not rebuff his affection, she did not return it either. Not yet. And so Solas did not linger, and once more wrapped his hands around her own.

“My hopes for retrieving the orb no longer rest solely with the restoration of the Elvhen people. I would see you safe from the effects of the anchor before I could move forward.”

“But you would still move forward,” she lamented, willing the tide of frustration and grief to not lend itself to another argument. It seemed they were doomed to go in circles and she was determined not to make another turn around this one. “You would still carry out this plan without hesitation and risk the lives of countless others beyond me. My friends. Your friends. Have you even given any thought to any of the things I said to you in the Fade?”

The reply he gave was not the one she was expecting. “Yes, I have.”

“What you are suggesting, I am not sure is possible,” Solas admitted. “Even my own understanding of how to bring down the Veil is limited to theories at best. The consequences of its destruction, little more than an educated guess. The timeline was expedited by Corypheus’ rise to power and his continued possession of the orb, but should we succeed in defeating him and retrieving it, it may unlock enough of my power to be able to use it to slow the anchor’s growth. If I were successful, and the chaos of the fall of the Inquisition averted, it would leave me with significantly more time to employ a… different strategy, if one could be found.”

Ellana regarded him with measured care, weighing present sincerity against past defensiveness. “What has changed?”

“You,” he answered with a nod. “You were… unexpected. Before I met you—loved you—” Solas corrected, “—my goal was clear. Those I encountered following my awakening I felt no affinity toward, and there was no reason to alter my plans to accommodate them. A world filled with people lacking the conscious connection to the Fade was a world of ghosts, and I owed them no favour. But you have become important to me, and through that you have shown that there was more to this place.

“It is not your fault that Elves lost what they did. All of the history, the knowledge of your people was left behind in places like this one. In our arrogance we thought it safe from the conflict, we thought our empire invincible… until the day it wasn’t. So much was lost when I raised the Veil, and the paths between these places disappeared. With no one to cultivate the knowledge, truths turned to rumour, turned to story, turned to legend. Degrading, as it passed from generation to generation. What little the Dalish have left is a pantomime of history, but it is more than most
would have been able to preserve beneath the force of genocide and targeted oppression.

“You are not all that you should have been, you are different, and… I did not give the consideration I should have to what grew from the remains. This is something I must see to its end.” Solas gave her hand a gentle squeeze, hesitating in the uncertain space between them. “But it is also something that is worth considering carefully.”

For that, she had no reply ready, and could only stare in silence. Eyes searching his own. Moved by the sincerity of his words and the humility with which he spoke of his mistakes. Beneath all his arrogance and pride he was as lost as the rest of them, and within that was perhaps the chance for him to see the world as an equal. It was a balm on her weary heart, and an ease off the weight she carried for an identity she could not reconcile with all she’d learned in such a short time.

Somehow, their fingers had become entwined. She squeezed his hand and, “Alright,” she said. Low and quiet; reverent in this setting of majesty and misery, where he had humbled himself before her.

In a time too old to be remembered, this place was full of beauty and wonder. Long ago reduced to a mausoleum; a monument to his miscalculation. He’d brought her here both to show her the legacy of her ancestors, and the far-reaching effects of his choice to raise the veil. This place with its upside-down courtyards and crumbling walls made for apt symbolism of the guilt he carried with him, always.

There was so much she could give voice to, but no words would come, so she settled on holding tight to the embrace instead.

She could not say who first began to move, but suddenly they were both leaning in, lips meeting in a soft kiss. Tender, and slow; with heat to soothe bruised hearts rather than stoke a flame. Something gentle, and vulnerable. Solas brought up one hand and ran two fingers along the curve of her jaw, then cradled it in his palm. Thumb resting against her bottom lip as he pulled away.

When the silence grew too long, “Thank you for showing me this place,” she murmured.

His eyes searched hers, a moment spent in silence as he measured his reply. Ultimately choosing not to say more. Anything he could have offered would fall short of his intention. This was a sacred place; a memorial to a people, lost. Words could do no justice to the wonder, and the pain it represented.

Time passed. She could not be sure how much they spent amid the endless shelves with their curious books, but the night had taken its toll on her by the time they returned to Skyhold. The puddles of wax in silver candleholders on the tables suggested it was well past midnight. The fortress was virtually empty. Silent in the wee hours when not a soul was left awake to wander.

Solas offered no protest when Ellana urged him toward the tower, and took him to bed. Too tired for anything beyond falling asleep together; enjoying the warmth of his skin and the gentle weight of his arms around her.

She slept soundly, curled against his chest, drifting off to the beat of his heart beneath her ear. Savouring each breath that moved his chest, and what the time they had to hold each other until he slipped away with the dawn rising over the mountains.

Chapter End Notes
End of part one.

Thank @pushtheheart for the fact that this story is continuing from here, because originally it was going to end - permanently - at this chapter, instead of opening a whole new narrative with the next. Stay tuned, next chapter is a timeskip. (°_ʖ°)

TRANSLATIONS:

Andaran atish’an mithadra Elvhen = This is how the library spirit greets you in game, but there’s no official translation that I can find. Closest is, “Enter this place in peace, honoured Elvhen”.
Atisha = Peace
Six Months Later

Chapter Summary

This is short, so think of it as an intro chapter rather than a full one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say the past months had been busy would be an understatement. Ever since the events of Halamshiral, now nearly a year before, Skyhold had been inundated in letters. Word of the Inquisitor’s skillful dispatch of Florianne (and her assassination plot), before a backdrop of the grand ball, had travelled swift and far. The story growing in both scale and debauchery the more it was told. Now, countless others between Ferelden and Orlais suddenly required the presence of the Inquisition to help settle their disputes.

Sorting, answering and potentially scheduling the endless requests was a task no one man could ever hope to conquer.

Fortunately they had Josephine Montilyet, and she was worth ten.

It was solely by grace of her position as envoy to the Inquisition that the organization had not been crushed beneath a mountain of unanswered letters. Somehow, she had managed to turn the pile into a manageable list of replies, refusals, invitations, appointments, meetings and other obligations the Herald absolutely must attend to. But even her magic had its limits, and eventually a plan was made for representatives to attend a portion of the more pressing requests in person. Such journeys were not uncommon; travel to and from the fortress for business and politics was a regular occurrence, particularly in the warmer months — though at times the planning could be… tricky.

Finding and splitting willing party members into two travel groups for the tasks was hardly a challenge. The Inquisitor, Cassandra, Dorian and Iron Bull made up the first, on the road the longest at nearly seven weeks; while Solas, Varric and Blackwall would travel for just over a month.

Delegating the list of responsibilities between them and creating the schedule wasn’t a problem either. While some may argue that they lacked for entertainment, the main roads between townships were hardly a bother, and no one truly minded the journey. The travellers more than competent in case of ambush, and injuries were rare.

The difficult part was deciding when and where to work in the supply-gathering detour to the Fallow Mire so that no one could weasel out of it.

Currently holding the title, ‘worst locale in all Thedas’, according to Varric, the Mire was at the bottom of most everyone’s visit list. Between the putrid stench of the bog, the mist that hung in the air, and the constant threat of disease from both contaminated water and hordes of wandering undead, it made for poor respite. Damp clung to clothing like a second skin, making everything feel just on the wrong side of clammy, and worse for every day spent in its midst.

Yet against all odds a few small encampments had moved into the area and begun to build a
sustainable village. While not terribly large, the people there had managed to lay down roots and find an unexpected home in the bog. A few farmers, a merchant or two, and some occasional foot traffic soon turned into a small settlement; and a surprisingly self-sufficient one. What they could not forage from the meagre resources within the swamp, they bartered for with Inquisition camps or neighbouring towns… and beyond all expectation, trade was booming. It turned out the area had one thing going for it: a rich supply of dawn lotus. The herb was a required ingredient for most types of healing potions, and wasn’t found anywhere else — making it a valuable commodity that a budding village could depend on.

The Inquisition had managed to get by for the better part of a year on the last supply brought in from the area, but stores were running dangerously low by the time Josephine had set to work on making up the most recent travel schedules.

Both groups would pass near the Mire on their way back to the fortress, it was barely a detour. And given the ever-present risk of disease it simply made sense to redirect a party already on the road rather than send out new bodies. One of the groups need only spend a few extra days out, and the bushels of lotus brought back to Skyhold made it worth any discomfort they suffered.

At least, that’s what she said every other time parties took an entire week to return from the area, slowed and sick from its flu.

But the benefits of trade far outweighed the risk, and it was Josephine’s job to ensure said benefits were reaped.

Unfortunately, the Ambassador learned some time ago that simply asking would never yield the desired result, and so initially the Mire was not among either of the party’s itinerary. Instead, it was sent out only after both groups had spent a month in transit. The note was delivered by raven, waiting for whichever group stopped first at the Inquisition’s largest encampment on the outskirts of the Hinterlands.

As it happened, it was Dorian who was handed the scroll when his party made camp ahead of schedule. They’d barely settled in, having only just sat down to enjoy a hot meal when a young soldier approached and gave the message to the first body he saw. Upon reading it, the mage loosed a string of curses that even made Iron Bull sit up and take notice, then reduced the parchment to ash in a fit of pique.

Ten days, three fevers and several packs of dawn lotus later, the party found themselves back at the same camp. Predictably waylaid by illness, they chose to forego the last item on their schedule — a visit to Redcliffe — in order to reduce the risk of bringing the flu any further. By coincidence, their group converged with the other, and a brief discussion saw Varric and Blackwall reassigned to the Hinterlands while Solas joined the Inquisitor’s party to help ensure they all returned to Skyhold moderately healthy.

Though after travelling with the sickened party for a day, he’d come to regret the decision.

Dorian had not stopped complaining about the squelching in his shoes since they left the Mire, adding it to the ever-growing list of grievances he aired to anyone who would listen. The constant prattling nearly drove Solas and Cassandra to an aneurism from the stress of remaining politely quiet. Meanwhile, both Iron Bull and Ellana had failed to completely shake the “Mireflu”, and it left them absolutely useless on the field. Should the party run into trouble, the two were liable to cause more problems than they’d fix and so were delegated to the back of the convoy.

With each other.
And a gap between them and the other riders so not to risk the illness spreading any further.

Thus far, Dorian had managed to avoid falling prey to it and Cassandra — being the first to show symptoms — made it through the worst on less than a single day’s rest. Though this came as no surprise, as she so rarely succumbed to illness. Solas, having arrived later, safely bypassed the most contagious stage.

By the time the party was half a day’s ride from Skyhold only Bull had shown a modicum of improvement. Something he attributed to his heritage, rather than luck. And as the day wore on, he took increasing joy in lording it over Ellana. Braggadocio under thinly-disguised concern each time he caught her drooping in the saddle as she rode along beside him.

“I think maybe you should be taking my rest breaks too, boss,” he said, watching her list to one side of her hart for the third time in an hour. “Now that I don’t need the extras, you should take the opportunity to double up. You’re not looking so hot.”

From somewhere beyond them, Dorian gave a snort.

“No one asked you,” Ellana yelled ahead, and coughed.

“He’s right, you know!”

Ignoring him, she turned her eyes upon the beads of sweat that had gathered at Bull’s temples and the pallid hue of his skin beneath. She nodded in his direction. “You’re not exactly the picture of perfect health, yourself.”

“Mm,” he groused, “probably not.” And conceded the point with a shrug. “But you look like you’re either going to throw up or pass out and if you don’t decide on one soon you might end up doing both. And that’s going to be unpleasant for everyone.”

“I’ve managed not to succumb this time around and I’d like to hold that record all the way to Skyhold. Let me travel in peace.”

If anything, she’d only encouraged him. He grinned. “Maybe it’ll make you feel better. Let it all out. Just—” He made a dramatic, sweeping motion with one hand. Drawing an arc from open mouth to the ground. “— get it out of your system.” Ellana made a disgusted noise worthy of Cassandra, and Iron Bull chuckled slyly. “I was puking all day yesterday and I feel much better. You remember, right? Of course you do. Dorian pushed me into the woods so I wouldn’t get sick
They’d all spent long enough serving in the Inquisition together to have seen each other in various states of wellness, dress, and dignity. But there was something uniquely uncomfortable about succumbing to nausea before a group of your well-respected peers. Something Bull was, predictably, unaffected by.

“I’m serious, Bull. Stop talking.”

“Seconded,” Dorian piped in. “You’re making me visualize it.”

“The more the merrier!” he retorted. The curl of his smile turned devious. “Just pretend we’ve been out drinking all day instead of sleeping in disease-ridden camps. It’s the fun kind of sick, where the room spins every time you try to lie down and you can’t remember your own name. Like that night a few months ago in the Herald’s Rest when you drank half a bottle of that whiskey and Sera spun you out of your seat—”

Ellana coughed, and then gagged, giving the anecdote an abrupt — and apt — end. Not quite losing what little she ate at breakfast, but coming close enough to make her spit into the snow and wipe the her mouth against the back of her hand. She turned an evil eye upon the Qunari as she righted herself.

“See?” he proclaimed, as though he’d performed some impressive feat rather than sour her stomach. “Just a few more of those and you’ll be right as rain.”

“For the love of the Gods just let me make it to Skyhold so I can crawl into bed and sleep for days,” she begged him in a low murmur.

“You assume Josephine would let you,” Dorian quipped over his shoulder. “She’s probably got another eight weeks of travel already lined up. Hours of important meetings await you at Skyhold.”

She groaned. “Gods, I hope not.”

But he was probably right.

It seemed like every day there was more to do; she’d hardly had a moment’s peace during waking hours and couldn’t even recall when the last time was that she’d managed to take an afternoon off for herself. This trip, while admittedly exhausting, had offered her more hours of quiet solitude than the last few months combined. It only lacked for intimate companionship. Something made all the more apparent by the presence of another couple throughout the experience.

Though she loved them dearly, by the end of a seven week stint witnessing every stolen smile and brush of their fingers just didn’t hold the same adorable appeal it had at the start. Nor did night number 37 of overhearing things she had no want to overhear.

Somewhere around the end of the first week Cassandra had gifted her a pair of tightly coiled knots of cotton wool to stick in her ears, and though elven hearing was more sensitive than a human’s it at least dulled the ruckus enough to let her fall sleep. But for all her annoyance there was a part of her that was deeply jealous of their shameless attitude.

There was an evening out near Highever where they stopped at a roadside inn, and after several rounds of drinks Iron Bull had rest his great forehead against Dorian’s temple, closed his eyes, and smiled. And for a moment the world seemed to dim around them. The scene warmed her heart, before bruising it.
Not a thought was spared for the presence of an audience; they exchanged affections openly. Unabashed. Whether on the road, in taverns, or behind the thin walls of the tent they shared each night. They were jubilant, and in love, and proud, while her heart beat behind closed doors. Hiding from politics, formality and expectation. The closest equivalent she knew was the brush of Solas’ fingers against her wrist, hidden beneath a table. Bull and Dorian’s freedom was a luxury she longed for more than she cared to admit.

And never had that pain been brought into such sharp focus than it had the night before, when she’d come upon Solas at camp after his group unexpectedly arrived a few hours after her own. Her lonely heart soared at the sight of him, and though exhausted by illness she’d have done anything for the privilege to throw her arms around his neck and embrace him fully. Sleep for hours curled against his body instead of spending another blasted night alone on a straw mattress.

Now, thanks to the Mire, their reunion would be delayed even longer.

Damn this journey. Damn the Mire. Damn it all.

“—would miss us, admit it,” Bull was saying. His teasing lilt brought her wayward thoughts back into focus, and she realized she’d been staring at Solas’ back as he rode ahead of her.

She scoffed, to cover for the fact that she hadn’t been listening, but it was Dorian who provided the quip she’d yet to muster. “I’m sure she’s as sick of us as we are of this road, amatus.”

“Is that what’s got your stomach in a spin?”

The laugh came out more like a hiccough, which was followed by a decidedly unpleasant burp that she tasted in her nose. Wincing, she pressed her lips together tightly and held her breath. The threat of sick was pressed hard against her throat and she had no want to tempt it.

A quiet moment went by like that before Bull began again, “Just let it—”

“Please, Bull. I don’t want to have to kill you.”

“In this condition?” He snorted. “I’d like to see you try. Don’t get me wrong, you’re a good fighter — but not when you can’t take more than three steps without needing to catch your breath.”

“Maybe she can just vomit on you and get you sick a second time,” Dorian provided dryly. “That might do the trick.”

The Qunari was quick with his retort. “Careful. You’re riding awfully close for someone who has yet to build an immunity, mage. Maybe I’m not done yet.”

“Will you all please shut up?” Cassandra yelled from the head of the line. “This is truly disgusting. Solas—” She pulled on the reigns of her horse to slow it down, coming astride of him. “Surely there is something in your pack for this?” she plead, and the subtext of her request was clear: give them something to make them stop.

He glanced at the supply packs attached as saddlebags, frowning. “No, just herbs and salves for injuries I’m afraid. We did pass a glen with elfroot a few moments ago; it has been known to settle nausea and lower a fever. If we stopped here—”

“No!” Ellana interrupted, braving the risk of a rolling stomach to cut Solas’ suggestion off at the bud. “No more delays! Just stop talking about it. Stop talking to me. Leave me alone and I’ll be fine,” she said, punctuating the statement with a pointed glare at Iron Bull. He held up both hands in a gesture of surrender, and finally — gratefully — quieted.
Not wanting to risk giving him an opportunity to start again, Ellana gave her hart a little kick in its’ side to pick up speed. The rest of the group followed her lead, and soon all were traveling at a light gallop.

The terrain in this part of the Frostbacks was still fairly smooth, and the slight chill in the air as the summer met with fall meant the rivers had all but dried up. It made for an easy ride. One that could be travelled a touch faster than normal. Maybe, if they were lucky, the group could shave an hour off the time it usually took to cross the mountain pass and they’d be able to climb the Endless Steps to Skyhold before nightfall. They’d have to ride a little harder, but after so long without the comfort of a quiet room, lit fire, fresh water (and, perhaps, a chamber pot at the ready in case she felt sicker) she was tempted enough to risk the jostling a faster pace would give her.

Oh, but if her clan-mates could see her now: a lifetime of Dalish pride over sleeping rough in the forest, readily cast aside before the promise of a soft bed and a lover to share it.

Just then the hart gave a sudden jerk as it leapt over a broken stone in the road. Rolling her forward in the saddle hard enough to push her chest into the back of its head. The sudden impact sent a hot rush up the back of her neck, warning her that this vertigo was unlikely to resolve itself without her requiring the use of a bush.

_Fucking Qunari._

She pressed two fingers against her lips and squeezed her eyes shut, but it only served to make her more nauseated. And when she opened them again, she caught the tail end of a concerned frown Solas was giving her over his shoulder. An unspoken plea clear in his eyes: _do not stress yourself needlessly._

Ellana gave him a petulant stare in return, casting distain at the very idea that he might want to lecture her about her health after barely a day back in her company. But the look he gave her in return was so full of genuine concern that she didn’t have the heart to keep it up. Reluctantly, she would admit he had her best interest at heart. He always did, when he worried over her; she’d come to find the trait endearing.

From behind her, Bull heaved a wistful sigh, and she felt her stomach flip in anticipation of what would surely be another attempt to purge her of sickness.

He did not disappoint.

“You know what I can’t wait to get back to?” he asked to no one in particular. Nobody deigned to prompt him for the answer. Though he was hardly deterred, and took the silence as invitation. “Steak! A nice, juicy, steak. Not cooked though. I like it just a little warm. When you can still see the blood running out of it when you take a bite. You know how you can taste it on the back of your tongue? _Mmm_, that’s the best.”

“Bull, I swear on all that is good and holy, I will end your life if you push me any further,” Ellana muttered in a voice far too meek to properly convey the sincerity of the threat.

But he continued. “Some potatoes and stewed vegetables would make a nice side dish, don’t you think? Just fill your mouth right to the brim with ‘em. Wash it down with some of that nice Dwarven ale they’ve got at the Herald’s Rest. You know, the good stuff that really burns. Just eat, and eat, and eat. I haven’t had a good meal since we stopped out by Lake Calenhad and had that rabbit stew that old human woman was serving at the inn. _Ahh, _” he sighed. “It’s got nothing on what Cabot can do with some venison and rice, though. What about that really dense bread—”
In the seconds before she thought Bull’s taunting might have pushed her just an inch too far, Dorian broke in and saved her the humiliation. “You know he’s sweet on the apothecary girl. The elf.”

It seemed to work. “Who? Elan?”

“Is that her name? I always forget. She writes him letters, you know.”

Unfortunately, the damage was done, and seconds later she found herself bent over one side of the hawt gagging hard enough to draw everyone’s attention back to her. When it was over she sucked in a sharp breath, bringing a hand to her mouth and covering it tightly as though it might undo what had just occurred. Or at the very least prevent it from happening again.

Bull seemed to take the act as a personal triumph, instantly forgetting Dorian’s attempt to distract him with Cabot’s torrid affair with the herbalist. “There we go! Isn’t that better?”

Not even remotely, she thought, along with some other choice insults. As loudly as she could.

Dorian was saying something — either to her, or to Iron Bull, she couldn’t quite tell — and Cassandra was most certainly yelling at him. Atop it all she could just barely hear Solas’ voice; the ringing in her ears drowning out the details. And while she was reasonably sure he was speaking to her she had no desire to stay and answer him in this condition. Before another roll could hit, she climbed off her mount and stumbled beyond the scrub brush on the side of the road. Searching for a more private location than the centre of a circle of her companions to be sick in.

An old, thick, tree stood a few dozen steps off the main path; surrounded by tall bushes that made a suitable partition between her and the road. She leaned heavily upon it, one arm folded across her forehead. The bickering of her companions faded to an indiscriminate buzz behind her, punctuated by the occasional shout from Cassandra, who had finally seen the end of her patience. She took solace in the idea that, at the very least, Bull was being appropriately shamed for his part in this.

No more than a minute went by before she heard someone approach. Then felt their presence at her side. The gentle touch of a hand upon her back rubbing slow, comforting circles between her shoulder blades.

“I thought Bull and I were in quarantine?” she muttered. There was no need to look up to know who had come to check on her. “Aren’t you worried you’ll catch it?”

“Well, let’s agree to not exchange any fluids and I’ll stay to hold back your hair,” replied Dorian. Gently, he combed his fingers through a weft of hair that had fallen over one side of her face. Knuckles brushing over her temple, flushed and beaded with sweat from the strain of taming her stomach. He tucked the loose curl behind a pointed ear, then pressed the back of his hand against her forehead.

“You’re not fevered anymore,” he remarked, brows raised hopefully. “So at least you’re out of the thick of it. Bull was right though, you’re looking more than just a mite peaked. I’d suggest another stop so you could rest a few hours if I didn’t already know you’d refuse it. I understand the want to get back, but you’re pushing yourself too hard. How are you really feeling?”

Before offering an answer, Ellana lifted her head from the crook of her arm. Looking over Dorian’s shoulder.

“Catching on, he pitched his voice lower. “He’s gone to find you elfroot, you can complain freely.” Some of the tension left her shoulders with a weary sigh. “I’m exhausted, Dorian,” she admitted.
“This last detour to the Mire has ruined me. I barely slept last night and yet can barely stay awake today, but there’s not more than two hours left in this fucking expedition and I swear to the Gods I refuse to be responsible for yet another delay. We’ve wasted enough time already and we’re so close to home I can taste it. On top of it all I’m positively furious that I cannot have a moment’s peace to properly greet Solas after not seeing him for the better part of two months, not that I could without the risk of passing this on! At least you have had your lover here for you through this whole thing.

“Worse, I have no one to blame for that — perhaps Josephine at a stretch — yet it still rankles. It’s just one more thing to be upset about and I am well beyond the limits of my patience!” She meant to go on, but all the righteous anger in the world wasn’t enough to tame the twitch in her throat that insisted she quiet immediately, lest she succumb to it. So rather than continue the rant, she offered only a quiet, “Ugh,” to mark its end.

After a pause, “I don’t know that I’d consider the rest stops ‘wasteful,’” Dorian remarked. Choosing to ignore the rest. “Bull did improve once he had adequate sleep.”

“All I’ve done this week is sleep,” she countered quickly. “No one can possibly need this much sleep. This blighted journey—” she stopped. Breathed. And only after an exceedingly long pause managed a strained, “— is going to be my death.”

Dorian sighed. Drew his brows in concern and rubbed his hand along her back again. “Shenanigans aside, have you eaten even one meal today?”

"Yes," she hissed through clenched teeth. When she’d emerged from her tent that morning she’d not felt even remotely like having breakfast. Barely managing to choke down half a serving of boiled grains before surreptitiously dumping the rest in the bush.

He gave her a look but said nothing to the obvious lie. It was clear he was running low on his stock of comforting advice and suggestions. “Well, can I help somehow?”

After a moment of thought, “Mm,” she murmured, and nodded. “Help me get this damned corset off.”

"I thought you’d never ask," he quipped.

Quick fingers went to work loosing the bindings of her leather amor. He didn’t bother with her legs or arms, correctly assuming she’d just meant to remove whatever was touching her midsection. Once the lacings had been worried loose he gave it a tug down over her hips and then stepped back to give her the space to remove it entirely. She shimmied it down her legs and kicked it away, then pulled her blouse loose from her trousers and folded the hem down. But to her great disappointment, removing the pressure from her middle didn’t provide nearly as much relief as she’d hoped.

Burying her face into a folded arm once again, she leaned heavily against the tree, closed her eyes, and breathed. And for a long and almost pleasant few moments, she stayed that way. Attention focused inward upon the rhythm of her chest rising and falling. The sound of the wind fluttering through the leaves. The feel of Dorian’s hand upon her back, warm and firm. Somehow the peace allowed her to fight back the worst of the vertigo. Breathe in, breathe out. Count the seconds as they passed and allow the nausea to be carried away with the breeze. She’d almost begun to enjoy the stillness.

Until...
“We’ve been sent on these trips a few times now, and you weren’t nearly so bad off,” Dorian remarked suddenly.

Something about the way he said it caught her ear strangely. It wasn’t so much that the comment was impolite — and it was impolite — as it was that his tone seemed off. Uncomfortable.


“No, no, I didn’t mean—” He stopped. Or was stopped, more accurately. Thoughts grinding to a halt with lips still parted around an attempt at clarity that he couldn’t quite get out.

Ellana lifted her head out of the crook of her arm to pin him with a glare, but her indignation was quickly cooled. He was staring at her with the most peculiar expression. Brows knit deep and eyes a little wide; as though he’d only just now seen her for the first time. It was as curious as it was unsettling.

Stranger still was when he finally found his voice. “Ellana,” he said carefully. Rarely did he use her given name, preferring to call her by endearments and nicknames even in official capacities when Josephine would really wish he wouldn’t. And he spoke in an odd, stilted manner that she’d never heard him use before. “When was the last time you had your monthlies?”

The question was so bizarre she had to pause for the space of a few breaths before she could even begin to consider her reply.

"My... what?"

Dorian took half a step toward her, repeating, "Your monthlies," in a low whisper. The way he emphasized the word made it clear that he was expecting her to clue in to some shared secret. But whatever coded message he’d meant to impart didn’t translate, and in her state she could not recall a single instance where he’d used the term. Additionally, her thoughts had slowed to a trickle; all she could focus on was the quiver in her throat and the roll of her stomach. The prickling heat began to creep back into her face again.


The mage heaved a sigh. Pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered a curse under his breath. "Maker help me, I never thought I’d need to have this conversation with anyone." He clasped one hand firmly upon her shoulder, and turned her to face him. "What do the Dalish call it when, as a woman, you come of age and bleed?" he implored with a quiet urgency that begged her to understand.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, finally catching on. "A moon blood?"

The small success briefly thrilled him. "Yes, that! How long has it been since your last one of those?"

She narrowed her eyes, searching him for some explanation for the bizarre direction the conversation had—

Oh.

Oh, no.

Taking note of the change in her demeanour, Dorian’s brows lifted hopefully. A gesture of silent
hope that she had made the connection on her own and he wouldn’t need to break this down any further.

She met his gaze, and frowned deeply. "That's not funny, Dorian."

"I'm not joking." That was clear enough by the hard edge in his voice. "Just be a dear and count it up for me, will you?"

With gaze averted she did as he bid her; sifting through the last few weeks worth of travel and weighing it against her cycles.

Two months past Josephine and Leliana had come to her to finalize the plans. Once everything was confirmed she dismissed herself for the evening, and found Solas waiting for her in her tower room when she came to it. Knowing the length of time they’d endure apart, she insisted he spend every night they had left in her bed. A proposal he eagerly took to heart. The night before she was due to leave she’d been so reluctant to let him go that he agreed to stay through until dawn, soaking in every last moment they had in each other’s company before obligation would separate them.

The first few weeks on the road were a blur of activity.

They arrived at the border of Orlais ahead of schedule, and from there were escorted by horse-drawn coach to their many appointments, in many locales. For the next two weeks it seemed they stopped at a different city every day. Finally reaching Val Royeaux two evenings past when they’d been expected to arrive, roped into staying another day and a half to mediate a negotiation and one incredibly boring dinner party.

Following that, the party made their way back toward Ferelden, heading east, and then south on the imperial highway so they could visit half a dozen villages along the way. The order to detour into Fallow Mire was waiting for them when they camped at the edge of the Hinterlands, just days before they’d meant to attend their last appointment in Redcliffe and then head back to Skyhold.

Two things occurred to her then.

First: that she’d begun feeling worn down well before they’d entered the bog. She’d blamed it on travel fatigue and poor diet.

Second: that she had yet to use the cloths she’d packed for her blood. They were neatly folded in an interior pocket, untouched, right where she placed them the day before she left Skyhold.

Two moons had passed. She hadn't even noticed.

A heavy weight dropped into her stomach, the sensation stealing a choked gasp from her lips. And when she turned her eyes back to Dorian she saw the gravity of the situation dawning on his face, too. The understanding, when she whispered a weak, “Oh, fuck.”

A sudden voice drew their attention away. Solas had returned from the grove.

He emerged from the brush behind them with one arm raised, clutching a small handful of herbs. “I’ve brought some elfroot,” he announced. Seemingly pleased by the chance to tame a bout of queasiness. That eagerness was tempered once he got a chance to properly survey the scene. “If you are still feeling unwell, you can—”

For a moment everything went very, very still.

Dorian and the Herald stood barely an arm’s-length apart with the mage’s hands firm upon her
shoulders. Staring fretfully at each other until both turned their faces to Solas as he entered the glen.

Ellana’s face was sickly white, and for whatever reason Dorian didn’t look too much better.

Solas eyes flickered between them. “Is everything alright?”

If Ellana had any answer to give, it was lost when she doubled over and vomited onto Dorian’s feet.

Chapter End Notes

(°_3°) Welcome to part two.
Chapter Summary

So, fair warning for anyone who might be hoping for sunshine and rainbows: you’re in the wrong fic. An unexpected pregnancy is not always a happy event, and these are two people with a lot of baggage already. Being sensitive to that means exploring the possibility that things like this don’t always happen at the best of times, to the best of people — but somehow you try to make do. Shit’s complicated. People are complicated.

And with that out of the way, read on~

She felt as though she were an empty glass set upon a table’s edge.

An object without breath, thought, or substance. Hollow, and delicate.

Standing on a dangerous precipice before a great height, looking out across infinity with only the pull of the void beneath her. So carefully balanced that even the smallest touch could push her from the brink, and she’d fall. Shatter into too many pieces for there to be any hope of being remade. Somehow cracked already, just for the threat of it.

All of existence seemed to have retreated into a sphere around her, and she alone within it, floating in a quiet limbo. Outside, no time passed. Within, no thoughts formed. No voices spoke. There was no sound but for the ringing in her ears. No sensation beyond the gentle sway of her body in whatever space it occupied. No sight beyond a vision of pure, brilliant white. The scene unbroken but for the occasional appearance of a ruddy shape at the bottom of her periphery. Darting in and out of the scene in a steady rhythm.

It took some time to understand that what she saw were her own steps as she walked a snow-covered path.

She was… walking. That much was clear. To Skyhold. There were others. Beyond that the details became fuzzy. And the more she tried to reach for them, the more unfocused the whole picture became. It took considerable effort to find a single thread of memory and use it as a tether to try and pull herself out of the state she’d fallen into.

Somehow her feet had carried her out of the glen, though she couldn’t be certain how long ago that was. The last thing she could clearly recall was stumbling out of the bush — awash in a mix of embarrassment, confusion, and blind panic — leaving both Dorian and Solas behind.

Dorian — looking near as blindsided as she felt — couldn’t manage to do more than watch helplessly as she fled. Pressing his fingers to his lips when Solas looked to him for an answer, as if the act might offer him extra assurance this new secret would keep.

Solas she left standing with his hands full of elfroot in a misguided attempt to soothe her stomach.

The plant had made it into her grasp somehow. Held white-knuckle tight as though it were her only connection to the material plane. A few toothmarks marred one side of the stalk, and all but two
leaves were torn off. Though she had no memory of receiving nor eating the herb — and the nausea was no better for it — its earthy flavour lingered on her tongue, so she must have done so at some point. Maybe an hour ago or more, judging by the fact that what remained of the stem had begun to freeze from exposure.

It rolled against her palm as she uncurled her fingers. Slipped from her hand, floated away, and disappeared beneath her feet. Ground into the edge of a broken, stone stair jutting from the snow.

A dozen more upward steps followed that one before the terrain evened out again. As she climbed, her thighs burned from the effort; evidence that she’d been ascending for some time already.

She drew in a deep breath of mountain air, and the cold steeled her; drove her forward even in absence of a destination. She felt lost, but with her eyes closed she could find an anchor in an old memory. A younger elf, perched high in a tree with a bow on her back and a rope tied with fresh rabbits to be cooked for dinner. Taking a moment to watch the forest become heavy with snow before returning home to her clan.

That life seemed so far away now; like a dream she’d once had.

For the first time in many months, homesickness weighed upon her heart. Lonely for the quiet. For the forest. For bathing in rivers while clan-sisters picked burrs out of her hair, and laughed. Wearing a crown of braids wound by fast fingers, and rough leather armour fit for speed and stealth rather than fighting demons. The slow life of the Dalish gifted her with both peace and boredom; her people so rarely interfered with politics and war.

How different life would’ve been — how different she would’ve been — had someone else been sent along instead…

But they weren’t.

And now, she was here, in this moment.

That was enough to help her find her bearings: slowly, her senses began to return, and the surroundings take shape. Both behind and ahead of her were the crunch of footsteps on old snow. One set of heavy footfalls and two light in addition to her own.

The rhythmic sound of many hooves accompanied them. That one was easier: their horses and harts being led by the reigns rather than ridden.

An icy wind blew in from the West, licking a burning frost upon her cheeks and ungloved fingers. The tips of her ears hurt from the chill, and her lips were dry and chapped.

The Endless Stairs, as Varric often called them; they had to be at least half-way up the final climb for it to be this cold, and the air this thin. It meant the party was less than an hour from arriving at Skyhold, and that she seemed to have lost the memory the ones that had passed between now and when Dorian took her by the shoulders in the clearing.

And then…

The mage was maybe 30 paces up the road, seated sideways on the pack mount. Riding bareback with his legs dangling off one side. He traded snipes with Cassandra between sips from a silver canteen. Pieces of their conversation floated back to her: they were arguing about whether or not he had right to use the last of the drinking water to wash the sick off his shoes. Clearly they’d come to some arrangement, as his feet were currently wrapped with thick strips of linen bandages to protect them from exposure. Bull had taken up the rear of the convoy, carrying the extra bags that were
normally tied to the horse. Solas was just ahead of her.

Cassandra held the reigns of two horses in one hand and had, rather unhelpfully, suggested Dorian pack a spare set of boots in the future.

“Perhaps one less dizzying.”

But when the joke failed to draw more than a timid frown, she cowed, and the two settled into an awkward silence.

If Ellana harboured any guilt for causing his circumstance, she could not muster the wherewithal to tend to it. The urge to flee screaming was overwhelming. Tempered only by the fear that any action she took might draw Solas’ attention. Something she wished to avoid, lest he look in her direction and somehow divine the path of her thoughts. Not that there was not much substance to them, at present. Her mind was a jumbled, uncomfortable mix of too much and too little all at once. A dull roar she could barely hear over the thundering of her own pulse.

Over and over again she counted: days, weeks, months, meetings, journeys, nights spent in his embrace — trying to find the fault in her math. The miscalculation she’d made that could explain this away. Trade one mistake for another. It was in there somewhere, it had to be. Some forgotten week of bleeding that she’d somehow failed to notice. Twice.

That had happened before… right?

It had been busy — so terribly busy — and she’d been consumed by the schedule Josephine had written. Exhausted, really. It was plausible that a moon blood could pass by without her thinking too much on it. Maybe she’d skipped it. Or the stress of travel delayed it. Maybe it was so light that she’d not bothered to pull out her cloths. Or perhaps she’d bought some extras at one of the markets in Val Royeaux and her use of them simply slipped her mind.

But then she’d be missing the gold.

So she counted the weight of her coin purse.

When she gripped it a high, quiet sound slipped past her lips. Not quite something that could be called a laugh: a little too hysterical for that. After, came the first clear thought she’d had since this began: you’re an idiot.

This was a pathetic attempt at self-delusion. Even in this state, willful denial could only carry her so far. The truth — her circumstance — was plain as day. And had she bothered to think on any of her symptoms for but a moment she’d have realized it weeks ago.

For nearly a month now she’d not slept on her stomach due to how tender her breasts had become… and ignored it. Even when she began to have trouble tying the laces on her corset. Noticed how the friction-marks from the grommets had moved with the sudden growth. Yet she did not spare a second to even come up with an explanation. Weight-gain, bloat, heavy meals or odd cycles.

Just ignored it.

The fatigue and nausea she’d blamed on Mireflu, even though such an excuse would never hold under scrutiny. The malaise had begun well before they’d reached the area. Additionally, she’d been quick to anger lately, to the point where even Bull pointed out she was a, “little ball of fury”. Made an ill-advised joke about her odd sleeping habits; something about needing an extra nap. The comment almost earned him a small rock to the back of the head, but she stopped herself. If only
to ensure she did not prove his point.

And then there were the dreams. They’d been so strange recently. Vivid, sprawling settings filled with colour and intensity that left her feeling a little off-kilter when she woke. The clan midwife always said that came first. Big dreams heralded little passengers. All together it painted a damning picture. The two bloodless moons were just the nail in the coffin.

She could be...

Was...

The word wouldn't come. It wouldn't even form at the edges her mind. And any attempt to find it made her tongue feel thick and heavy, though she'd not tried to speak. The entire idea was so unbelievable that it would be easier to convince herself it didn't exist at all rather than to try and apply it to her future. To her present.

Still, it was persistent. Flitting around the periphery of her consciousness to tease her. Taunt her. Both elusive, and insistent. Willing her to reach out and grasp it. To hold it close to her heart, then sit down to think it through. Allow herself to fully understand the implications. The permanence, and the change it represented. Not just for her, but for the Inquisition as a whole and her ability to continue leading it.

To plan, to fight, to put herself on the front lines — at risk — the way she had in the past. If she thought they fought now about her penchant for running recklessly into battle…

This would change it all. Change Solas.

You change everything.

And then she was reeling all over again.

Everyone was depending on her; looking to her as a leader, a fighter, and authority on this conflict. A religious figure — touched by the hand of fate and ready to lay herself down for the cause of what was good and righteous. A wayward elf brought into the fold of Andraste’s most devoted, now positively brimming with godly virtue.

Believers painted her image on canvases and walls and held her up as a holy thing. Some fine example of the Maker’s will working through his children. And it was their faith in that lie that kept many of her human followers from spitting as she passed. Their prejudice barely quelled by the power she wielded in the palm of her hand. A knife ear sitting on a shem throne leading a shem organization filled with even more shems all looking to her for guidance.

And there she would sit before them, by the grace of a precarious balance of faith and circumstance, having worked so hard to shed the cloak heavy with their low expectations… only to have them all watch her belly grow tight and swollen with the bastard child of her secret lover. Not only an elf, but by all appearances an apostate. She’d become the very thing she’d spent so long trying to prove she wasn’t.

What a joke I will be.

The dread settled like a stone in the pit of her stomach. Cold and heavy.

Gods, how the fuck am I to deal with this?

A desperate thought occurred to her then: she could hide it. Drown herself in a wardrobe of ill-
fitting clothes and make excuses not to travel as she grew. Then, when the babe came, she could pretend it was a foundling she’d taken a shine to. Josephine would be able to help her craft a convincing lie. Maybe Leliana, too. They were great at that sort of thing. No one would ever have to know. After all, she was a foundling herself — the fact was hardly a secret — it wasn’t so far-fetched that she would show compassion for another in the same situation.

But… where would she even get a foundling inside a military fortress?

It wasn’t as though little elf-eared babes grew in the garden plots each spring. Additionally, there would be no witnesses to corroborate the story. And she’d be feeding the ‘orphan’ at her breast.

And she’d have to tell Josephine and Leliana the truth in order to pull off the ruse.

The thought sent a fresh wave of panic through her. Of course she’d have to tell them the truth. She’d have to tell all of them the truth! She’d have to call an official meeting and everything. Stand at the war table before her advisors and let them all know that the trusted leader of their politico-military organization and pseudo-religious icon had found herself in a situation reserved for hormone-addled youths that were too lost in the throes of passion to have enough foresight to be careful.

So much for shouldering the responsibility of the Inquisition, apparently she couldn't even handle the most basic precautions when having sex.

It made for a humiliating scene, in her mind. The wave of surprise, then disappointment and anger that would surely come from the three of them. It would sting. Not just from the shame of having her personal life laid out for all to see, but for the fact that she should know better.

Precaution was a hard lesson taught to her by harder hands at the age of 15, when her Keeper found her behind an old, broken aravel outside of camp. Wrapped around a doe-eyed boy a season older. Her hair a mess and skirt hitched up to her waist. She’d fawned over him for months. So much so, that the triumph of successfully wooing him had brought far her more satisfaction than the resulting encounter had.

She’d shouted every curse she knew as she was dragged away by the ear. Vile, forbidden words she’d never dared to speak aloud before. Keeper’s stone-faced silence spoke to her fury; she didn’t even try to lecture her. Ellana struggled and screamed against the grip until she’d managed to twist just far enough to land a blow on the old woman’s wrist, causing her to let go.

This final act of rebellion was the breaking point, and earned her a strike across the cheek with an open palm. But it was the warning Deshanna imparted upon her following it that left the worse sting.

“You’re a stupid girl,” the woman snapped. There was no love in her eyes when she turned them upon her delinquent ward. Teeth bared and nails digging into the meat of Ellana’s arm. She spit upon her bared feet, then shot a hand beneath her rumpled skirt, between her thighs. And with her suspicion confirmed, held up two fingers of damning evidence before the teen’s ruddied face.

“You’re bound to end up in more trouble than you know. It’s a hard life for a bastard, let alone one cursed with a mamae who chases pleasures and pickpockets like an urchin.”

As a final insult, she wiped her fingers across the neck of Ellana’s clean blouse. The one she’d bought with stolen coin specifically for that evening, in the hope of seducing the boy — Jarrett. She glanced over her shoulder, toward the aravel she’d been dragged away from. Torn between the hope he’d rescue her from this, and the relief he’d not have to see it.
Surely he was long gone by then.

“*Babes aren’t made in the dirt beneath you — if nothing else, remember that!*”

To stand before her advisers… she would become that young girl all over again. Red-faced and ashamed before a tide of Keeper’s ire, with no excuse to offer for her carelessness. More than twice the years had passed since that first mistake, and yet somehow she was still making it.

Deshanna ought to have slapped her twice.

She was nineteen the first time she saw a friend succumb to the fate she’d been warned about. *Head full of romantic stories and not enough sense,* the elder women said. They offered the girl — Lael — their advice on everything from nursing to naming customs. Even gifted her bags of seeds to eat for richer milk. But whispered and gossiped when her back was turned. She stood as a warning to the others: don’t be so foolish with your affections. Don’t be rash. Don’t be stupid. Don’t be like her.

Lael never gave up the name of the father, and he may very well have never learned of the child’s existence. She was scorned for her silence. Yet, when her middle began to swell she neither cried nor grieved. Nor was she ashamed. She did not hide herself the way Ellana had expected her to do. Instead, she smiled; said the Keeper was wrong.

*“There are no mistakes, just surprises.”*  

Ellana wasn’t sure that perspective was any more or less true than that of the elders’, but when Lael’s son came she was truly overjoyed. He hung the moon and stars with his tiny, dimpled fingers. Not a day went by that he didn’t enamour all who knew him.

He was a few months shy of 11 when Ellana left for the conclave; helpful, smart, and beautiful like his mother. Handsome, maybe, like his father. Above all, deeply beloved.

Perhaps bearing witness to her friend’s experience should have gifted her with the confidence to know that she too could make it through such an upheaval — but it didn’t. Instead, the Keeper’s words echoed through her mind all the months she watched Lael prepare for her life as a mother. The scorn of the elders, the shame of a mistake, the proof of her naiveté followed her like shadows… the challenge that met her would surely be ten times the weight to bear than if she’d waited.

The event left such an impact on her that she swore off men completely. And before Solas, she hadn’t had a lover in years. Back then, she’d promised herself if she ever did decide to lay with a man again, she’d be careful. More careful than Lael was. More careful than *they* were. More careful than *she* had been as a wild and tender-hearted youth.

But she wasn’t.

She wasn’t, when Solas followed her into the tower room to continue an argument about travel arrangements. She wasn’t, when his restraint shattered beneath her careful touch and he devoured her like a man starved. By the next morning the promise she’d made to herself so long ago had been broken no less than three times. And then she *kept breaking it;* forgot she’d ever made the promise at all. It was so easy, *too easy,* to simply be lost.

For a moment, she felt a kinship with Lael, and for what she’d endured so long ago.

But then the hard voice of her Keeper formed so clearly in her mind that she could swear the woman was standing behind her. Eyes narrowed, with her old fingers wrapped around the ball of a
walking stick. Ready to warm her backside with it just like she’d done so many times before. It was a wonder trouble hadn’t found her sooner.

*Now look what you done, girl.*

The anxiety that churned in her stomach suddenly spread upward. Crashed through her chest and up along her neck. Running deep into every vein and constricting around her throat until it stole her very breath.

She gasped. Swallowed. *Choked.* And the resulting spasm gave her just enough of a warning to take two shaky steps to the side before her knees gave out, and what little there was in her after the glen was emptied onto the side of the path.

Ice and snow tore at her palms when she caught herself upon the ground, though she had no thought to spare for the pain. The retching had her crippled, doubled over with such force that tears began to sting her eyes. There wasn’t much left in her to lose at that point, having covered Dorian’s feet with what she’d eaten at breakfast. Her nose and throat burned from bringing up bile.

In the moment, it felt endless. As if all her energy was being pulled violently from her body. Heaving hard enough to make her cough and gasp between each roll, all but sobbing as she struggled for breath amidst the lurches. Soon, well and truly crying. Heavy tears streaming over flushed cheeks, freezing on her neck and chin before they could hit the ground. Sweat beaded on her brow in spite of the chill. Her arms trembled with the effort of holding herself up, though she could not say if it was the weather, weakness, or emotional upheaval that was causing it.

When the episode finally subsided she was left a mess, wretched and raw on hands and knees. Head hung below her shoulders, and each new breath a shudder. Carefully, she shifted her weight to one hand to allow the other to push her hair back behind both ears. Managed a bitter laugh at the small mercy: at least she’d managed to avoid getting any sick in it.

She spit into the snow, then raised a trembling hand to wipe at her mouth — and her eyes — with a sleeve. At the very least she could hide the tears. This experience was more than enough to bear without adding the humiliation of being caught half-way to a breakdown on the icy steps outside of Skyhold.

“Damn, boss,” remarked Iron Bull, and the sound startled her. His voice was gentle, though far nearer than she’d expected it to be. The comment made her suddenly and uncomfortably aware of the absolute silence that had fallen over the pass in the wake of her illness.

At some point during her ordeal Iron Bull had dropped the packs on the ground and come to kneel nearby; offer his support. He regarded her with a strange mix of disgust and admiration. It was a sweet gesture, though she had no strength to smile. Nor even to push herself back up off the ground. Her arms still shook, and her knees felt too weak to bear her weight. As a reply she simply shook her head, then turned away to spit again in the hope of relieving the acrid taste from her mouth.

Bull’s hand hovered over her back for a moment, not quite touching her. Then he gave her a few tentative, comforting, pats. The act was surprisingly delicate for a man his size and a hands-breath large enough to take up most of her upper body. He was so tender, when he meant to be.

Concerned, “Are you sure you can make it up the pass?” he asked. When she didn’t answer immediately, he dropped in a joke to lighten the mood. “I could probably add you to the load. You can curl your knees up and I’ll slip you into one of the bags on my back, like how the Tamasserans carry the babies.”
But, oh… that isn’t what I needed to hear at all, and the world began to spin again.

“No,” Ellana managed, before it could get any worse. “No, just… I’m alright, really.” When she tossed a glance over her shoulder to drive the point home, she realized everyone else in the party had stopped to stare. Wonderful. Had they all been standing there the entire time? Just watching this unfold?

Her eyes found Solas, standing a dozen steps beyond Iron Bull. Even at this distance she could see the way his brow lined. Heavy, the way he looked when he worried over something. Worried over her. For a moment their eyes met, and then fear got the better of her and she quickly cast her own to the ground. The evasion didn’t quite have the effect she was hoping for, and instead of leaving her be, he approached. Reached into his bag to retrieve another stalk of elfroot.

“Here,” he offered. “Chew this. It will help.”

The idea of putting something in her mouth after all this made her want to gag, and had she the strength left she might have begun retching all over again. “No,” she moaned, shaking her head. Repeating, “I’ll be alright. I’m fine.” If she said it enough times, maybe she’d start believing it.

A brow raised over Bull’s lone eye. “All due respect boss, but you don’t seem fine. I haven’t seen anyone sick like that since Cutter challenged Krem to drink from one of my tankards. I think the guy lost half his body weight in puke.”

That managed to get a laugh. A quiet, stuttering little sound, but a laugh nonetheless.

Ellana pushed herself off the ground and sat back on her knees. Hiding her eyes behind the heels of her palms until she managed to take enough steadying breaths that the threat of tears could pass. When she chanced a peek between her fingers, she saw that Bull had come around in front of her to offer his hand. With a weak smile, she slid her fingers into his palm and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. Wobbling a little; dizzy from exertion and lack of food.

The Qunari slid an arm around her shoulders for additional aid and together they walked back onto the path. His steps supporting her own until she’d taken enough to be confident she wouldn’t stumble, and slipped out of his grasp.

She passed by Solas only the briefest glance in his direction. But it was enough to catch him watching her. Now beginning to look a little upset by her behavior. The continued denial was only alerting him that something was off. ”Once we return to Skyhold,” he began, “if you would permit me to—”

It was a ploy to get her alone with him, and she recognized it immediately.

“No!”

The protest came out with far more ferocity than she intended. Solas blinked, clearly taken aback. Beyond him Cassandra exchanged a wary glance with Dorian.

A slow, careful breath in. Calm. Then, ”No,” Ellana tried again, more softly. “That’s not necessary Solas, thank you. I’m already starting to feel better; I just needed to get it out of my system.”

The lie was weak, she knew, and he would argue with her if given the opportunity. So before he had the chance to try, she took off back up the stairs. Passing Dorian and Cassandra in silence, she pressed steadfastly forward.

No one followed immediately, allowing her to take the lead. Only after a painfully long moment
did the rest of the party choose to shelf any lingering concern, and continue on behind her.

*It won’t be long,* Ellana assured herself. Maybe an hour of travel at the most. More than anything, she needed to be alone with her thoughts.


"Your worship," greeted the gate captain. “It’s good to see you. Welcome back.” Ellana reached the entrance ahead of the party, and he gave her a respectful nod before signalling a guard to raise the portcullis. She did not wait, ducking low to slip inside before it was barely high enough for her to come through without crawling. Then all but ran into the yard. Behind her, the guards exchanged a look but said nothing.

"Inquisitor?" called Solas. She didn't have to turn around to know he had followed her under. "Inquisitor!"

Ignoring him was, perhaps, unkind — but all the alternatives seemed worse. Getting to the tower room was the first priority, and the main hall was within sight. Her pace quickened across the courtyard, carving an evasive path through the throng of friendly passers-by who had come to greet her. Merchants and soldiers made up a small crowd that was always ready to welcome the party home after a field mission. On any occasion, the attention made her uncomfortable. Today, it was virtually terrifying.

“How fares the roads, Inquisitor? I’ll be travelling to Denerim soon.”

“Did you visit Redcliffe? My sister is there.”

“Glad to see you well after such a long journey!”

“I’ve received a new shipment of ore I was told you may want to look at.”

“You look peaked, Herald — a hot meal would do you good.”

One after another after another, until they’d managed to completely stop her in her tracks. Polite nods and a strained smile only dismissed a handful; most were too excited by the party’s return to step back even after she’d tried to excuse herself several times. Eventually, resorting to a terse, “Thank you, but please—” as she pushed past. “I have to go.”

A glance over one shoulder told her the rest of the party were in the process of handing off the mounts to a stableboy. Solas was quickly catching up.

*I’m not running away,* she lied, *I just need time to think. I just need to be alone.* Time to herself to figure out what the next step would be.

*Solas.*

Solas was the next step.

And his steps were right behind her as she fled.

He caught her just outside the entrance to the main hall, though it wasn't until he took hold of her elbow that she was finally stopped. "Inquisitor!" he pressed, pouring as much emphasis as he could
onto the title. The plea within it was hard to miss, and it spoke to his rising level of concern. That, and it was rare he touched her in polite company. Let alone before a crowd, and with such familiarity. This was bending the rules, and she acutely aware of appearances in this moment. Already the shout had drawn a few eyes toward the pair.

The wide-eyed shock writ upon his face when she wrenched her arm from his grip was almost enough to break her resolve. Almost.

To his credit, he recovered quickly. Suitably chastened for the slip, and erected the calm and courteous facade he was so good at. “Given the events earlier I would think it prudent to let a healer see to you,” he said carefully. “If you would consent to—”

“That’s not necessary,” she snapped. Had not meant to, but she suddenly found it very difficult to reign in the frustration. It occurred to her a second later that there may be a good reason why, and was immediately hit by another wave of anxious nausea.

It must have shown on her face. He frowned, and his voice softened. “I can fetch someone from the infirmary. Or perhaps Vivienne if you are not comfo—”

That would be much worse. “No,” she cut in, backing up the stairs. “I’m fine, really Solas.”

This time, she made it almost all the way to the door of her tower before he caught up with her. Pitched his voice lower for discretion’s sake and urged, “Please, Inquisitor. This is not the time for modesty. You’re suffering from dehydration and exhaustion at minimum.”

Over his shoulder she watched as the rest of the party entered the hall and found a long dining table to sit down at, near the one Varric often occupied. He wasn’t there now; a small mercy, lest she accumulate an even larger audience than was already present. There were few others in the hall, but the longer she lingered the more would come.

With a loud thunk, Bull dropped the remaining packs onto the table he’d claimed with enough force to rattle the frame. He threw her an odd, calculating sort of look, but ultimately chose to hang back. Content to stay out of the argument. Dorian pulled out a chair next to him and went to work unwrapping his feet, eyeing her from across the hall. He looked worried, though she imagined his reasons were closer to her own than to Solas’.

Cassandra made a beeline for her. She didn’t even stop to put down her backpack first. Approached, and managed to only get out the word ‘Herald’ before Ellana cut her off as well. Threw up both her hands and announced, “I’m going to lay down for a little while. Tell Josephine that I will see her in a few hours.”

The Seeker frowned deeply. “But—”

"Really," she assured, “This is silly, I’ve been sick before”.

“Not like that,” Cassandra interjected, before Ellana had a chance to silence her again. It was true: in the time she’d been with the Inquisition she’d had a few bouts of illness but none that could be considered serious. Or that resulted in her on hands and knees on the side of the road, violently vomiting into the snow until she could only bring up bile, gasping for air between heaves. She’d done it twice more before they reached the fortress — though it was unclear if the nausea was actually worsening or her current stress levels were contributing to the severity. Regardless, Cassandra’s concern had grown exponentially with each episode.

Valid or no, it didn’t matter. She had no desire to continue the exchange, and so turned around and
ducked into the tower before learning if the Seeker had anything further to add. Truthfully, she would feel the same if it was one of them — but she could not risk a healer’s intervention. The idea of the subject being forced to light by a third party before there’d even been time enough for her to fully absorb the news herself was not one she was keen on.

The door closed behind her. Then opened again not five seconds later.

_Damn him._

He was right on her heels, following her into the tower. Even after she closed the second door, he persisted. Pushed it open again before it had the chance to latch. On the stone steps into her room, his fingers wrapped around her elbow again — a little more firmly this time.

“Vhenan, please,” he urged.

And again she twisted away from him.

In private, however, this rebuff didn’t have quite the same impact as the others. He followed, mystified, as she sat down on the edge of her bed. Sank into the Orlesian sheets and heavy comforters made up in anticipation of her arrival and removed her boots and leg wraps.

A hand came to rest upon her shoulder. “Are you fevered?” he asked, and made to touch her forehead with the back of his fingers. She batted his hand away, and her petulance gave him pause. A deep line formed in his brow, and the bridge of his nose. It was an expression she knew exceptionally well: he was beginning to get irritated with her.

A high fever would be an obvious explanation for the sudden and inexplicable change in her behavior. She could try to play it up; pretend to be suffering from dehydration, as he’d suggested. Borderline delirious. It might buy her some time. But, “No,” she answered instead. The lie wouldn’t come. Her mouth seemed to be working on its own accord, regardless of her intentions. She shut it tightly and bit the inside of her cheek, suddenly rather worried that the truth might come pouring out were she pressed for it.

Whatever outcome he’d hoped for when he followed her up the stairs, this was not it. “This is absurd.” The harsh edge in his voice told her he was rapidly losing patience. "I have never seen you so ill. If you are not fevered, you could be poisoned.” He had that same tone as when they argued about combat tactics: when he would accuse her of recklessness and she would accuse him of micromanaging and they would inevitably get caught in a circle that would continue until one of them walked away. It grated on her already frayed nerves.

A quiet huff of something not quite like laughter passed her lips. "I'm not poisoned," she murmured. She shrugged out of her jacket, and threw it to the other side of the bed, then went to work at untying her leathers. They soon joined the rest of her travelling clothes in a haphazard pile. When she was comfortably dressed down to her tunic and breeches, she pulled back the duvet and crawled underneath, then turned her back to him. “I’m going to lay down for a few hours and rest.”

Barely a second passed before the covers were ripped back. Startled, she turned over and pinned him with a pointed look. The wrinkles above his nose had multiplied, and it conveyed his anger more clearly than a heated shout could have, but the pleading look in his eyes told her it was care over fury that drove him.

"And how do you know this?” he snapped. His voice nearly echoed off the walls. It was a brazen show of frustration the likes of which she’d only seen a handful of times.
She began to sit up, to argue, but he thrust a hand outward to block her and she found herself firmly — but gently — pushed onto her back upon the bed. He was rarely so implacable, and she was ready to call him on it and pick a fight. Push him to walking out the door in a fit of pique. But then he rolled up a sleeve and pressed his folded hands together against her midsection.

The protest died instantly on her tongue.

All she could think about what was what lay within, and if it were possible his magic could find it when he searched her for injury. His strengths did not lie in healing, but he was more than competent enough to diagnose broken bones, internal wounds and bleeding. He’d proven it time and time again on the battlefield. Moreover, he was less likely to pull punches in private with her — given all she knew — and would exercise the full range of his magical ability.

She held her breath.

He didn’t seem to notice. “You are being childish and reckless,” he chastised. A soft, green glow began to emanate from his palm and she felt the familiar push of his mana in her body. The magic searched — for a wound, for poison, or some other explanation for the severity of her illness — she could feel the warmth of it crawling beneath her skin, sinking into her stomach and spreading up into her chest. “Additionally, this has gone on far longer than just the last few days. Iron Bull mentioned you’d been ill for some time, since well before I joined you. And that it’s only worsened with your neglect. You are a powerful figure, and a target: any sudden or extended illness should be treated as suspect and seen to as soon as possible. Regardless of whether there is a simple explanation.”

His hands moved under her ribs.

“Beyond poisoning, do you not realize how serious the situation could become were you to have internal injuries that were not properly mended? Sepsis can initially mimic the symptoms of Mireflu, but worsens quickly if left untreated.”

Downward now, toward her navel.

“Beyond that, there are reports of venomous creatures in the Mire whose bites have a delayed onset. It could be days before you showed symptoms. If you’d been bitten during a skirmish, it would be easy to miss.”

Over her pelvis.

“Considering the circumstance, and the time spent on the road without access to proper care, refusing a healer is lunacy. With all that has happened, you should be taking more caution to—”

And abruptly, the lecture ended. His brows drew into a deep frown, as though confused, before his expression suddenly slackened. Eyes wide and gaze fixed on a point somewhere upon the opposite wall, though clearly unseeing. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his lips parted. He did not speak; there came a sharp, soft gasp — and then he fell very, very quiet.

The glow of magic remained in his palm. An insistent, inquisitive press that had now surrounded her entire midsection in swirling, warm light. It was not an unpleasant sensation — she had felt his magic more times than she could count, in every context from salacious to utilitarian — but the quiet persistence of it laid bare his shock. She was raw and exposed beneath it. There had not been time to think of a plan; to prepare for a conversation, a confrontation, or even imagine how one might go.
This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen.

None of this was supposed to happen.

She waited in anxious silence for a reaction. *Any reaction.* But he didn’t move. Didn’t even blink. It hadn’t even occurred to her that he had yet to let out the breath he’d been holding until it slipped past his lips with a halting shudder.

The room felt cavernous.

Too long passed without a word. Without a sound, save for her own shallow breaths. Seconds, minutes — it felt like it could have been hours. Her heart pounded a deafening beat in her ears, and just when she feared she might succumb to the torrent, she finally managed to force out a raspy, “Solas?”

That jarred him back into the present. His hands jerked away from her body so suddenly that she jumped in surprise. Wide eyes found her own, his face as white and drawn as she’d ever seen, and she could only think of an animal cornered by prey. With the flow of magic stymied, his open hands hovered in the empty air above her. Useless, and frozen. Trembling, she noticed, before he quickly balled them into tight fists.

The longer the silence stretched on, the more uneasy it felt.

"Solas?" she tried again. It was terrible how small and meek it sounded when she spoke. “Do—would you like to sit down?”

The suggestion was ridiculous and she recognized it as soon as she spoke it aloud, but she could not think of anything better to say.

He blinked. Opened his mouth as though to speak, but no sound came. Then pressed his lips into a hard line and dropped his gaze to the floor. To her middle. Then met her eyes again. And, “Yes,” he answered finally. At the very least, his halting whisper was no better than her own.

But following the reply he said, and did, nothing more. Merely continued to stand there next to her as though held in place by some unknown force. He stared down at the bed between them. Silent, and stone-faced. Then just when she thought to ask him again, he turned on a heel.

And walked out of the room.

*#

The creak of the door alerted those that had remained in the hall that someone had emerged from the tower. And with a speed that betrayed any attempt to appear incurious, all three paused whatever they were doing to watch Solas take two steps beyond the threshold, and then… stop.

There he simply stood, in silence.

Cassandra had remained where Solas had left her when he followed the Inquisitor into the tower, now leaning a hip against the side of the throne. She straightened, and looked to him expectantly. Awaiting an update. An explanation for her behavior. Perhaps the reassurance that she actually was *just fine* and had chased him out for bothering her. *Anything.*
A full minute went by. Then nearly two. Still, he offered nothing — apparently lost in thought. Even knowing the man as well as she did, it was unclear whether this reflected positively or negatively on the situation.

When nearly a third minute had passed without any change, she cleared her throat. “Solas?”

No response. Not even a flicker of recognition.

“Solas?” she repeated, a little louder.

His eyes snapped to hers. "Seeker?"

A brow raised curiously. “Does she need a healer?”

He did not answer her. She couldn’t be certain if he’d even heard her ask the question, because before she managed to finish speaking his eyes had already become unfocused and drifted to a point somewhere off to her left. Slowly, she turned to follow his gaze, but saw nothing beyond her but empty tables — Dorian and Bull sat on the other side of the room, about 30 paces back.

It was as though he’d suffered a concussion. For a moment she wondered if he had.

Behind her, Bull coughed loudly. “Hey, Solas?”

He looked up. Blanked. “Yes?”

With his attention focused, Cassandra tried again. Quicker this time. "Is the Herald alright?" Still, he gave no immediate answer. Just deepened the furrow of his brow. Though, at least he was looking at her. She rephrased. "Is she ill?"

A beat. His lips parted and his eyes fell to the floor a moment before returning to her. "Yes," he said tentatively. Then frowned. "No," A pained look crossed his face. “I d— she is…” Another pause. His mouth worked in silence over something else he could not quite push through. Finally settling on a stilted, “Fine,” in a way that made the word sound foreign and unfamiliar.

But before she could ask any follow-up questions he walked past her, toward the rotunda.

Cassandra turned and watched him disappear through the side door without a word. Cast a glance at the others, who looked just as dumbfounded as she felt, and then resolved to follow him. She stopped short of entering the atrium, instead pausing just inside the hall and holding the door open with one hand. Inside, she watched as he pulled out the chair at his desk and sat down.

There he remained. Open palms pressed upon the top of his desk, back rigid, staring down at his papers. Presumably, ready to attend to his work, though he made no move to start.

It was apparent that, for whatever reason, she was not about to get anything more from him. Gently, she allowed the door to close, and took two steps back from the hall. Turned, then came to stand with the rest of the party and trade meaningful looks in the awkward silence that followed.

It was Bull who spoke first.

"Well," he said. "That was weird.”
"I think you might have broken him."

The sudden interruption to the silence gave Ellana a start. She hadn’t heard the door — neither a knock, the hinges, nor the sound of anyone climbing the stairs. Yet when she lifted her head from the pillow to find the source her eyes landed upon Dorian, leaning on an elbow against the stone banister.

Standing there lit by the soft, late-afternoon light that filtered through the curtains — with a gentle, reassuring smile — he could have been a spirit sent from beyond to save her. For his presence, and the comforting lilt of his voice in the empty room, her relief was palpable. The sight alone was near enough to tear a sob from her chest; the stifled sound escaping as a sputtering laugh instead.

It appeared to be the invitation he was waiting for.

With arms loosely folded across his middle, he approached the bed. His pace was slow and cautious, weighing her presumed need for comfort against the possible desire to be alone with her thoughts. His steps made no sound, she noted; and a glance at the floor confirmed he had not yet returned to his room to find another pair of shoes. With his spoiled disposition and fussiness about dirty feet, it was a small detail that spoke volumes.

“He's just sitting at his desk,” Dorian continued, “Like this.” He demonstrated an appropriately glass-eyed stare. “I don't think he's even blinked more than twice in the last twenty minutes.”

She drew herself onto her elbows and shimmied upward until she could comfortably lean against the loft of pillows at the head of the bed. Making room for the mage to sit next to her. Frayed nerves and tender stomach had her wringing her hands raw. With considerable effort, she managed to fold them together and rest them upon her lap instead. Careful not to position them high enough to touch her middle. That was... not something she was quite ready for yet.

"At least he's still in Skyhold,” she joked. The voice that spoke didn't sound like her own. Not weak anymore but flat, and hollow.

*Shattered like a glass on the floor.*

"For now," Dorian conceded with a nod. "No telling once he regains his ability to walk."

The comment was intended as levity, she knew, but she could not help the way her face fell in response. She hadn’t thought far enough ahead to get to that part. Whether or not she’d be alone or a couple through this. And if the latter, for how long?
Six months?
A year?
Five?
Fifty?

He would outlive her — of that there was no question. But would a child inherit a mortal life, or an Elvhen one? Was there a median? Was there even a precedent for this situation?

*Didn’t he say once before that conception between Elvhen required conscious planning?*

The terrifying notion occurred to her that she might have somehow caused this with a stray thought, before the better part of her dismissed that as *completely* ridiculous and she reminded herself that regardless of what existed in his time, he’d *also* said he was — for all intents and purposes — mortal save for magical prowess and lifespan.

*How had they not ever discussed this?!*

Beyond such semantics, this was not taking into account the Venatori, the war, the Veil… whatever other obstacles lay ahead and might impact a possible future together.

There was *so much* to consider.

Clearly, she couldn’t hide the dawning horror on her face, for Dorian gave a wince and audible sigh. Flashed her a sheepish smile as apology for the slight and came to sit down on the edge of the bed. The mattress jostled when he settled next to her; the motion rocking her stomach unpleasantly. “How about you, my dear? How are you holding up?”

“I’m—” she began, but stopped. No easy answer came to her. No jokes, quips or even truths to offer in reply. The uncomfortable, swirling, buzz of thoughts had not yet subsided and while she imagined it would probably leave *something* in its wake, what that might be was not yet clear.

Anger?

Maybe at herself. Absolutely at herself.

Fear? Definitely.

What else was one supposed to feel at a time like this?

… *Excitement?*

That one gave her pause.

Somehow, she couldn’t imagine herself ever feeling excited. And yet, wasn’t that what someone was supposed to feel; what all of this would inevitably lead up to? Happy families with happy smiles and happy plans for an idyllic future. Carved wooden cradles and cotton diapers folded in a stack. The kind of future she’d never really put much thought into. At least, not since she was still a little girl playing with dolls. Deep in the woods where no eyes would see she rocked imaginary babes to sleep in her arms, cooing the soft lullabies she heard other women sing to their real children. Songs not meant for the ears of motherless wards.

It was a game she’d put to rest with her childhood.
Having a family was an inevitable — even sacred — part of being Dalish. A promise kept to the bones of their ancestors that the People would live on upon the ruins of their ancient cities. Still, she had not ever truly thought about what the expectation meant to her. Without a partner, at least a male one, she’d never bothered to indulge the idle fantasies her friends did. Of names, ticklish toes, and tiny pointed ears.

Then there was her duties as a hunter, for the clan. Then the conclave. Then the Inquisition.

The two ideas seemed fundamentally incompatible. Try though she might she could not envision herself on the throne, sitting in judgement, with a babe suckling at her breast. Or on horseback with round belly beneath loosely tied armour. Perhaps standing at the war table with her advisors, planning out new routes and diplomatic treaties with a toddler nestled in a sling across her chest.

It was more than simply ‘incompatible’ — the thought was outright ludicrous!

She did not realize her laughter had been aloud until she caught the curious eye Dorian had turned upon her. One brow lifted, head tilted; all told, he looked unsettled.

Ellana shook her head. “I’m sorry, I’m just…” but her thoughts trailed off into that swirling noise again and took her words with them.

At the very least, he was patient with her poor contribution to the conversation. More so than she was with herself. “I think that’s to be expected,” he assured, and smiled. It warmed her. “I imagine it'll take at least five more minutes before everything starts to fall into place.” He took hold of one of her shoulders and gave it a squeeze. “When it does happen, know that I'm here.”

“Thank you,” she replied. The sincerity of his promise was enough to lift the corner of her mouth a little. The closest approximation to a smile she’d managed in hours.

A moment later he stood — moving more carefully this time to ensure he did not jostle the bed — and made for the water closet. The sound of splashing in the basin told her he was fetching something to drink, and though the thought still made her stomach turn, truth be told she could use it. She’d not had any food or water since breakfast that morning, and then promptly lost what she’d managed to consume in patches along the mountain pass.

He handed her a teacup full of cool water. Carefully wrapping both his hands around her own to encourage her to grasp it well, lest she ignore the offer and set it aside. She took a few small, slow, sips so not to aggravate the nausea further. It no longer had the choke-hold on her that it did earlier, but had yet to completely disappear.

Inwardly, she wondered if it would… or if she'd feel like this every day from now on.

_Gods, I hope not._

The room was quiet again, though this time a comfortable pause rather than the oppressive emptiness that Dorian had so gratefully disturbed. Ellana cast her gaze toward the windows; following the leisurely path of a cloud as it drifted across the sky and disappeared beyond the curtain. There were very few clouds today — the sky was a bright, brilliant blue and an unseasonably warm breeze blew in through the open door that led out onto the terrace. It was beautiful. She might have even enjoyed the walk up the pass, were the circumstances different.

The sound of soldiers training in the courtyard floated up now and again; the clank of metal on metal as old, blunted swords collided. The dull, echoing thunk of a wooden shield hitting a chestplate, and knocking someone off their feet. Swearing, yelling and taunting from the men and
women in the ranks, followed by Cullen barking an order to stand up straighter and pay attention. Someone yelled a rude phrase in Tevene, and a chorus of laughter followed.

It was the typical clamour that filled the yard on any other afternoon, yet today felt anything but normal. Familiarity offered only betrayal over comfort: how could everyone just go on living another day as though nothing had changed? How did everything seem the same when the entire world had just fallen to pieces at her feet? Every mundane, ordinary, thought and sound felt traitorous. She almost prayed for a rift to open in her bedroom and swallow up the whole keep. Turn everything upside-down and spit them out inside the Fade surrounded by monsters and nightmares.

Perhaps if that came to pass, things would feel somewhat more balanced.

A pair of birds came to perch upon the railing. They flitted back and forth, bobbing and teasing, calling quietly to each other before taking flight again and disappearing somewhere below.

Ellana scoffed. Murmured, "It figures."

“Hmm?” prompted Dorian.

She took a long sip of water from the cup before she continued. “It’ll be spring. Bloomingtide, I think.”

“The season of fertility and growth?” he suggested thoughtfully. But when she met his eye, it twinkled with mischief. "Or is it the abundance of animalistic lust that precedes a season of birth thats more apt?"

A single huff of silent laughter gifted her a smile. A real one this time. It stretched over her lips until her teeth showed between them, and her eyes crinkled at the corners. Then the quiet sound grew into a deep, full-throated chuckle. And once it started, she wasn’t able to stop it. The tinkling multiplied until she was caught in a fit of giggles the likes of which she hadn’t experienced in recent memory. The cup in her hands jiggled and jostled with the convulsions until the water began to slosh out the sides and sink into the duvet. Gently, Dorian plucked it from her fingers and placed it on the nightstand, his own laughter joining with hers.

She laughed until she began to wheeze and cough, and her eyes prickled with unshed tears.

She laughed until she cried.

And then cried until she sobbed.

Heaving, wracking, body-shaking throes that she pressed into cupped hands. Bent and broken, crushed beneath a weight of confusion and fear waiting to be felt since mid-morning. Now a force that hit her like a hurricane. And like the laughter, once the tears began she found she could not make them stop. Could not pick a single thread amid the tangle to find what had been the final straw to overwhelm her. The quiet buzzing of her thoughts had transformed into a deafening roar and yet still she found she could not identify what, exactly, it was screaming.

Through it all, her friend comforted her. Gathered her in his arms and held her tight. Whispered soothing words and gentle assurances she only barely heard, but was grateful for nonetheless. When the worst had passed, he combed his fingers through her hair — as he was apt to do in times like these — and said bright things to make her smile.

“If I recall correctly,” he began softly. “The last time I had you like this was when we were wondering if he’d ever work up the nerve to sleep with you.” More laughter came. More tears
followed. She could not speak through it, so he continued in her place. “That one worked out quite well though, didn’t it?” A pause. “Perhaps a bit too well.” He smoothed a hand over her hair. “This will work out, too.”

He sounded so sure — she could almost believe him.

“Remember my dear, you’re the Inquisitor. The Herald of Andraste. You survived the conclave, walked the Fade in the flesh, mended rifts across Ferelden and Orlais, saved houses, prevented assassinations and have overseen countless political gambits. You’ve even killed dragons! This is far less frightening.”

She chuckled weakly, rubbing at her eyes with the heel of her palm. “I’d argue this is far more frightening.”

"Less dangerous, at least?” he pondered.

"Than a dragon?” she asked. He tilted his head curiously. “Mildly.”

They laughed together; a steadier sound than whatever mania had overtaken her previously. This was brighter. Something that might even begin to chase away the darkness that had gathered. Enough that at the very least, the nausea began to abate for the first time in many hours.

Vulnerability was not a trait she was entirely comfortable with, even here in the arms of a trusted friend. It took considerable effort to shake herself free of the urge to curl up and turn away — to let herself breathe — and pull down enough of the walls to let someone else in to touch that part of herself that was alone and terrified. But, it felt good — if not a bit strange. He was calming influence even when he had nothing to offer but his presence, and she found that she opened to it. She always had, since the first day she met him.

“I was to be bonded, you know.”

There was a thoughtful pause, followed by a rather absent “hm” of thought before he replied. “Bonded? Wait, doesn’t that mean married?” She felt him startle, pulling away from her in surprise. “You were married?!”

"No," she assured, laughing. "I wasn't married. More like... promised.”

"Betrothed?" he suggested. She could practically feel his curiosity itching beneath his fingertips as he played with a weft of her hair; dying to ask more but just clinging to just enough restraint not to push her past what she might be comfortable revealing.

"Similar," she affirmed. “Some are arranged, particularly for those who have standing or magical affinity. It assures the strength of the lines: magic, where it’s needed — none where it isn’t. You can only have so many mages in a clan, you see.” The explanation sounded far more bitter than she’d intended; more than she thought she felt. The hard edge in her voice surprised her. When had she become so resentful of the Dalish custom? Or maybe she was always bitter… just better at hiding it from herself.

Clearly, the sharp tone of her comments was hard to miss. There was no humour in the comment Dorian offered following it. "Perhaps we're not that different, you and I. Bound to the promises of good breeding?"

The chuckle she gave lacked any true mirth. "I suppose not.”

“What happened to him?”
She shrugged. “I’ve no idea. It wasn’t something that would have happened right away. Only if I’d remained unbonded until… well, until a year ago. I suppose it would have already happened, then.” That was an uncomfortable thought. One she hadn’t entertained before. “I suppose he was promised to someone else when I failed to return from the conclave. Maybe he found someone else instead, and fell in love.”

Dorian hesitated a moment on the next question, considering his words carefully. She knew what was coming before he spoke it aloud. “Did you care for him?”

Her answer was firm and immediate, “No,” she said, then winced at the finality of it. Amended, “As a friend, yes. Not as a lover. I suppose I might have been comfortable with him.”

“A means to an end, then?”

“Something like that,” she conceded. “I think most of the arrangements were. You were exceptionally lucky if you’d been matched with someone you already had a spark with. Though I think my Keeper would have gone out of her way to ensure we were kept apart, if we’d had one.” To his credit, Dorian did not pull on that thread, though she was sure the hollow laugh she added made it tantalizing. “If things had been different, I suppose I would already have a child. Or two. A little aravel and a straw bed for all of us to sleep on. Who knows, maybe I would have even liked it, if I’d not known any other life.”

He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, and pinched the tip playfully to catch her eye. “And now?” he prompted.

She took a breath. Repeated, “And now,” then swallowed. “Now I’m the Inquisitor.”

A single brow raised. “And?” When she didn’t provide the answer he was looking for, he tried again. “And you’re…” the word hung in the air, unsaid.

It clicked, and at once she understood what he was trying to do.

She loosed a sharp curse and made to move away, but he took hold of her arm and pulled her back before she could get to her feet. “You will have to come to terms with this eventually,” he pressed. “If you keep waiting for the right time to say it, it will never come.”

The logic was sound, but she still didn't care for it. “Please, don’t.”

“Say it and I’ll stop,” he countered.

A pause, as she pretended to consider the offer. “No.”

He frowned. “My, you’re stubborn when you mean to be.” This was a tactic only employed with only the utmost love and care, of course, but that didn't mean a part of her couldn’t hate him for it. If only because she knew he was right. She’d managed to go the entire day without hearing the word and would be content to continue on as long as she could that way. Saying it aloud would make it real in a way she couldn’t take back. There really wasn’t enough time to feel ready for that. She feared she never would be.

In fact, that was rather the point of this exercise of his.

It took every ounce of strength she had to finally force it out of her throat. All the while every instinct screaming at her to deny it. But inevitably, “I’m pregnant,” she whispered.

The lopsided smile that lit his face was at once delightfully charming and terribly infuriating.
“There we go,” he sighed in return.

The moment was interrupted by the sound of rusty hinges as the door to her bedroom swung open. The visitor had not bothered to knock. Of course, she knew who it was before he appeared at the top of the stairwell. Still, it made her anxious: she wasn’t sure what would come next in all of this, and the anticipation had her tensing. Worried to see him, as much as she was relieved of his return.

Dorian caught her odd expression and turned around in time to see Solas climb the last stair and come to a stop just beyond the banister. A steaming cup of tea was balanced on a saucer he held in both hands.

The room felt oppressively quiet as he glanced between them. His face an unreadable mask, as always — though the way his gaze lingered on Dorian before he met her eyes told her it was clear he hadn’t expected the man to be there when he entered.

"I can return later, if you are busy," he said quietly.

Dorian saved her the attempt at coming up with an answer, speaking to both as he rose from the bed. "Actually, I was just leaving." He bent to press a soft kiss to the top of Ellana's head, whispering, "All will work out, my dear," and flashed another smile before he turned to leave.

Something seemed to strike him as he passed Solas, and he stopped. Turned, and stood just behind him. Waiting until the elf turned to look at him curiously. Then, in an unusual show of tenderness for a man who he’d nearly always been at odds with, Dorian reached out and took hold of Solas’ shoulder. Gave it a reassuring squeeze, and him a meaningful look that communicated something neither could possibly have spoken aloud. Then descended the stairs and let the door click shut behind him.

What followed was painfully awkward, and for a good minute Solas did nothing to improve the situation. Standing stock still at the top of the stairs, eyes holding hers, but seemingly too lost to properly greet her. Holding the damned teacup as far away from his body as he could, as though he had no earthly idea what to do with it.

Finally, “Is that for me?” Ellana asked lamely.

He blinked. “The—ah, the tea. Yes,” he replied. And after a few jerky, aborted attempts to take a step he finally found his feet and moved to join her. Sat, carefully, upon the bed next to her and offered the cup.

She took it with a grateful nod, and brought it to her lips. Then, thinking better of it, smelled it first to ensure the flavour wouldn’t inspire more nausea. It had only just subsided, and she had no want to tempt it again. It was a familiar scent: sharp, and a little sweet. “Is this ginger?”

“Yes,” he answered. “For your… stomach.” And then it was quiet again.

Well, this is awful, Ellana thought.

Neither had any idea how to broach the subject and no matter how she framed it, the idea of diving into conversation about it seemed absurd.

So, do you want to buy the cradle, or shall I?

That’s absurd. This was absurd!

They’d never even come close to discussing the subject before, and were woefully unequipped to
do so now. There’d never been a reason to bring it up. No opportunity to leisurely plan for a future together. Neither held any assumptions about what the years ahead held for them beyond the defeat of Corypheus and his Venatori. And, in all honesty, she’d not once spared even a fleeting thought of creating a family with him.

*Or preventing it,* she realized with a wince.

When it happened, consummating their affair had been such a sudden and unexpected thing. It was not a natural progression of a typical relationship; a slow exploration of boundaries and permissions that would have ultimately led to her anticipating the event and visiting the healers to ask for doses of witherstalk. Even after, everything was so clouded by confessions and truths and arguments that it had never occurred to her. She had all the time in the world, and yet…

How was it that she could be so irresponsible? So *unbelievably* reckless? How many times had she been here, in this bed, gathered in his arms as he called her name into the fall of her hair and yet not *even once* considered the inherent risks of taking pleasure in each other?

*This is your fault.*

“This is my fault.”

She was so lost in her own thoughts that it wasn’t immediately apparent that Solas had said it aloud, not her.

*“Your fault?”* she repeated, incredulous. What in the world could he have done, other than not sleep with her at all? And, to his credit, he did put in a considerable effort on that front.

*Well,* reminded a distant part of her mind…

*Babes aren’t made in the dirt beneath you.*

But ultimately, *no,* she had not exactly encouraged that. Or mentioned it. He no doubt would have obliged, had she had the forethought to ask it of him. *Even once.*

*Stupid girl.*

“I did not think—” Solas was saying, “I had not considered the, *ah,* the—” It was almost charming, she thought, the way he stuttered and stammered as he tried to think of something appropriate to say. Some sort of apology; an admission of sole guilt in a mistake made by both of them.

*There are no mistakes — only surprises.*

“—anticipated that we, that *I,* should not have — should have been more careful…” He was still talking. Trying to, anyway. He’d not gotten much further. “It was not something one considered, in Elvhenan, and it was remiss of me not to—” he stopped again, hesitated, chewing on the words for a moment before finally muttering a quiet, ‘*fenedhis*’ under his breath. Apparently, he’d hit a wall.

She caught his eye, and tried her best to give a reassuring smile. In return, the corner of his lips twitched, just a little. That was promising. Quietly, she admitted. “I didn’t think about it, either.”

He was visibly relieved by that; the tension that held his shoulders tight eased a little. He nodded, but said nothing more. There was nothing more to say. This silence, at least, felt less oppressive than the ones that had come before. Though it still felt short of comfortable.

Her eyes turned again to the open terrace. The clouds, the birds, and the sounds of the training yard
She'd have to try and plan a meeting to tell her.

The room began to tilt, but before it could fly off its axis entirely, she felt a soft touch to her hand. Glancing down, she found that Solas had entwined his fingers with hers. When she reciprocated, he squeezed, and held on tight. As though he needed the assurance she were real. He held her like she was the only thing that anchored him to the world in that moment. What anchored them both.

A familiar memory came to her then: their first night together, the first time. Of stumbling, clumsy, blinded by desire and lost to the moment. The excitement, the want, and the anticipation. Then falling backward onto the bed to land atop each other in a tangle of limbs. The brief moment of shock and surprise that followed — the little spark of fear — to continue meant to change it all. To cross a line that had never been toed, and alter their relationship in a way that could not be undone.

But then he had smiled.

Touched her hip with his thumb, drawing a circle over sensitive skin, and told her he loved her.

Presently, he lifted their clasped hands to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles. Held her there while he drew in a deep, shuddering breath. His hand still trembled, just a little. He did not hesitate to say it this time.

“Ar lath ma, Ellana”.

And when her tears began to fall anew, he gathered her in his arms and held her tighter.

They stayed that way an age. Until, at some point within the embrace, when the tears had nearly dried and they’d slipped into silence again, she kissed him. One kiss became two, then more, until they gave themselves over to what was perhaps a wholly inappropriate coping mechanism… but one that worked nonetheless.

There was hesitation. She felt it in the brief seconds before his fingers delved beneath the hem of her breeches, and urged them over her hips. A question on his breath he didn’t quite give voice to. Or she silenced it, when she kissed him harder and took him by the wrist to guide his hand between her thighs. It had been weeks, and once the warmth of his magic shrouded them both there was no chance for clearer heads to prevail. Perhaps they needed this, as ill-thought as it was.

Drawn this close, she could feel the ache in his chest. A mirror to her own. The weight of unanswered questions and uncertain futures. But she chased it away, for now, with warm hands and soft mouth. Found a calm port amid the storm with each other and held on as tight as they were able; the one constant that could guide them safely through to the other side.

His grip on her paused, just for a moment, before the end. As though something had almost occurred to him, before sensation swept it away, and he held her tighter. Pushed her harder. Fingers digging into her thigh and one arm wrapped around her back to keep her chest held flush to his through the final throes.

What thought had tried to form then, did not fully register after it was over. Only once they lay entwined beneath the sheets, and reality began to reform as whatever compulsion had driven them faded. The brief respite lost.

“I’m sorry,” Solas said suddenly. And he almost sounded confused by his own apology. Ellana
lifted her head from his chest and found him looking at her strangely. It made for an endearing scene: his bewildered expression the dust of pink still present on his cheeks and ears. “I should have—” he began, then corrected, “I should not have—” and struggled with the rest.

When it became clear what he was getting at, the laughter that followed surprised her as much as it did him. “I think it’s a little too late for that, Solas,” she said.

He blinked, and then laughed. A little mad, a little too hard; not quite able to control the way it continued to tumble from him, unbidden. Unending. And the sound had her joining him in spite of herself. “Yes, I suppose it is,” he managed.

He laughed like she’d never heard him laugh before. Much the way she had earlier. He tried to stifle it with a tightly closed jaw, then a fist, until his eyes began to water and he brought both hands up to cover his face.

Wiped away tears that were too heavy to have formed from mirth alone.

The laughter died away, and the room descended into silence again.

Later, she would not recall how long they’d stayed that way. Only that they did not speak more of it. He did not reassure her that everything would be alright. And had he tried, she was not so naive to have believed it.

You change everything.

Chapter End Notes

A note on the calendar:
Bloomingtide = May. Where the story is, they’re entering Harvestmere (October). The Dragon Age wiki (http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Calendar) has the full calendar, including Tevene/Common names for the months, and holidays. You better believe I got plans for Satinalia, fool.

It will probably be longer before the next chapter is posted — I got shit to do — but here’s hoping these tide you all over in the meantime. And for real, your notes give me life and inspire me to write more. Thank you to every person who has left a review, a comment, a complaint about the wait time — I love it all. Every time I feel stuck, when it’s been a while, and someone leaves me some lovely ass comment, it puts the skip back in my step.
The first weeks after finding out, it wasn’t much of a challenge to keep the secret. What small changes her body had begun to undergo were not visible to anyone other than herself. A bit of bloat she could only barely see when she studied her naked form in the tall mirror, after a bath. A little more ease wove into her corset lacings when she dressed. Swollen breasts that lent her a curve she’d not previously enjoyed, though tender enough that she’d taken to wrapping them in a little more padding than usual to prevent her clothes from chafing. But, these differences were subtle at best. The first, early buds of a spring bloom.

The question of what change she would see was an increasingly curious one. She had no mother’s stories to compare to her own experience. No anecdotes or folk wisdom passed down through generations of family. Only her own naive, cautious, observations of other clan-women when they were swollen with child — and the memory of their screams rising from the tents when their time came. And more, what births she’d overseen among the halla and the other kept animals. Truthfully, she had more experience with them than her own kin. By the time she’d grown, she had enough knowledge to confidently assist in guiding out a breeched calf, and knew what herbs to use to help expel a held afterbirth, but would have no idea where to begin if such a fate befell an actual woman. Or, Gods forbid, herself.

If anything, she’d actively avoided pregnant women. The scars of lessons taught by a strike and whispers lent her a cautious uncertainty around the subject. A lingering doubt of how something taught to her as a curse could ever truly be a blessing. Beyond that, she’d never really thought much of it. Leaving her at a distinct disadvantage now.

For the first time, she wondered what her own birth had been like. If the ordeal was tortuous and long — an enduring trial of blood and sweat — or something more rhythmic with incense and song? She thought of the soft voice that existed only in her oldest memories, fuzzy and warped by time. And what wisdom she’d share, if her own mother were less a stranger.

But she was a blank slate, and her experience without root: no history existed to even give her the smallest hint of how her change would play out. Would she be small and plump, with a high bump easily hid beneath a heavy coat and loose armour? Or would she burst her clothes at the seams in a few months’ time, and require more clever tailoring to draw the eye away? The fate that met her parents meant that her family tree began with her own name and what life she brought forth.

It made her curious for the observations of others — or in this case, the one other — of what things she might not notice herself. But when asked Solas gave only a clever compliment in reply to her questions; telling her that he’d either not yet noted any change in her, or if he had, was too polite to say so.

Regardless, even if his eyes did not yet see her differently, she had felt the shift in his touch.

He was more careful — reverent, and soft — when they laid together, and he less inclined to use his magic on those nights. Caution, or ignorance, of what effects intimacy had upon a changing state. Though she knew better, and reassured through gentle guidance when he came to her room.

Those evenings were fewer now, much to her disappointment. But a backlog of responsibilities amassed over a two-month absence and the general feeling of malaise that had only grown since
she learned of her condition made it more and more difficult to find an opportunity… Or muster the energy, when one presented itself.

She was so tired *all* the time.

What symptoms she experienced initially were moderate, and relatively easy to slip past the notice of others. The one advantage to not having caught on to her state until she was already some weeks into it was that what small changes there’d been to her moods and habits had not yet raised any flags, given that they’d not been paired with any clumsy attempts to hide them. She was quicker to anger now, quicker to take upset, and found herself uncomfortably short on patience — but it could be written off as a mix of travel-fatigue and sleep-deprivation. Even without taking into account the sickness they’d brought with them (one that, unfortunately, spread through a number of other Skyhold denizens before burning out), there’d been so much endured since the events of the Conclave; it was not that unusual to experience a period of broken sleep and frayed nerves. It had a way of catching up from time to time.

Unexpectedly, it was *Solas’* behaviour that was at bigger risk of tipping someone off.

If a message from the rotunda needed delivery, he found a way to bring it himself. If she yawned, he would ask about how she’d been sleeping. When she felt unwell, he would be there to offer her tea or all manner of helpful medicinal herbs he’d recently acquired a plethora of knowledge on. Sweet, yes, though it quickly began to fray her nerves. On one afternoon, an acolyte of Mother Giselle made a joke about how often Solas seemed to be found in her company lately, and it would have surely led to an argument later if not for his quick deflection.

“*My station is in one of the most high-trafficked areas of Skyhold, and I can easily take a moment to bring a message to save her the journey up and down three levels to pick it up. One should be careful with what insinuations are made of the Inquisitor’s company,*” he’d chided, “*considering the propensity for gossip.***”

“*Of course.*” The girl flushed. “*My apologies; she was unwell, and is fortunate to have such caring friends.*”

Gratefully, it was dismissed as mere friendly concern.

Plans of how, and when, she would tell them all the truth had yet to be made — that was still some hazy, uncertain point *in the future* that she didn’t have to think about today. All that she’d decided so far was that the news would go to her advisors first, then the party after, and somewhere in-between she’d determine how to keep it hidden from the general public.

The latter being the greatest, and most important, challenge.

In what scattered attempts at conversation she’d managed to have with Solas on the subject of announcements neither had yet found a way to reconcile ‘powerful world leader’ with ‘ongoing vulnerable state’ in a way that did not invite trouble. No matter how she spun it, the idea of publicly announcing the pregnancy in the middle of an active conflict seemed foolish. Even if the information was given only to a limited audience, the news would quickly spread: gossip travelled faster than horses. It would be only a matter of time before news reached the boundaries of Orlais and lay in the hands of political opponents who might use the timing and controversy to their advantage. Fringe groups would be close behind, and from there no telling how soon it found the Venatori. Since her elevation to the position of Inquisitor she’d been the target of a slew of attacks on her character and at least one *actual assassination attempt* — adding an exploitable condition to the mix was unwise at best.
Additionally, this was not taking into account the moral panic that would come out of the Chantry when the words, ‘unwed’ and ‘apostate’ came into the mix. As unpleasant as it was to admit, she could not be certain which alternative would cause worse alarm: pretending she did not know the father, or revealing him. Of all the salacious rumours she’d endured, the truth was probably the most destructive. It had the potential to seriously undermine her position, if not well-handled.

For that, she’d need the help of her Ambassador and Spymaster.

Eventually.

“You cannot keep putting this off,” Solas reminded her one evening as he brought her a pot of tea. She’d taken to drinking a lot of it lately. “Delay too long and you will lose the chance to get ahead of it. If subterfuge is truly the best option, the more time there is to plan the better the outcome.”

Frustrated by the hours of agonizing she’d already put into this subject, she’d turned to him and snapped, “Then would you like to tell them instead?” Rose from her seat and pointed an accusatory finger at his chest. “By all means, go call a meeting and tell Leliana you’ve been fucking me and have gotten me pregnant and then ask her to fix the inevitable political fallout! I’m sure she’d be thrilled to hear the news! Doesn’t that sound like a delightful way to spend an afternoon?”

He’d been appropriately shocked by the outburst (which she \textit{did} apologize for in the end) but admitted she had a valid point beneath the ire: it was not a task he would want to do, in her place. And it was clear to him then that it was something she’d thought about at length. Finding a balance between the rush of necessity and the need for measured tact proved a more difficult challenge than she’d expected.

However, this did not negate the fact that it was a conversation she had to have. Sooner, rather than later.

But there was time to prepare.

Probably.

She just had to find a way of managing her energy in the interim so not to raise any more alarm. Something that became increasingly difficult as weeks passed.

The sickness and fatigue did not abate, nor did she become more accustomed to it as she’d hoped. And the increasingly poor diet was not helping matters, either. Soon she found she could barely make it through a single afternoon without falling asleep on her feet. A stash of herbs and cut ginger stole from the pantry was kept concealed in her pocket most afternoons, for chewing and smelling, in hopes it would help her keep it to herself. But it did not offer much reprieve, and she found herself increasingly desperate for a better solution.

What she could recall of Dalish herb-lore on the subject of pregnancy was too vague to be helpful. Bitter teas made from leaves and bark rich in nutrients. Sweetbreads baked with hops or rye for richer milk. Cured meats to encourage healthy growth. Dried and crushed elfroot rolled with sap and prepared into a mild incense for general malaise, though she could not recall how to make it in a dosage appropriate for alleviating nausea. Most of her experiences using the herb were for crafting healing salves and potions.

Solas continued to bring her ginger tea from the kitchens. Always fetching or brewing it himself and bringing it to her in private, rather than allow her to ask a handmaid for it. And while it was unusual for him to enjoy the beverage, it raised no alarms. Ginger had many curative properties, and for a man, persistent nausea wasn’t exactly the most obvious assumption. She wasn’t sure if it...
was helping, but she also wasn’t sure enough that it wasn’t that she’d be willing to stop drinking it.

In time nausea became more persistent. Then distracting. Disruptive. And finally, overwhelming. Soon, excusing herself for a few moments to catch her breath was no longer sufficient, and scheduling more frequent breaks during longer days was starting to grate on Josephine’s nerves. Lovely though she was, her patience could only be extended so far. After so many cancelled meetings for an ambiguous, “I don’t feel up to it,” the excuses were starting to rankle.

It finally culminated in a horrible afternoon when Ellana was stuck for hours in front of the war table planning routes into the Oasis for supplies. No matter how many times she tried to wrest the conversation away from commander Cullen, and end it, he always had just one more thing he needed to add. Happily oblivious to her steadily worsening condition. Then the subject of dragons came up and Lady Morrigan chimed in about how harvested claws may help restock the storerooms for reagents, and the brief imagining of carving bones from the skin of a fresh corpse sealed the deal. In the heartbeat that followed she knew there would be no avoiding it.

Josephine noticed first. Turned all attention upon her with the innocent inquiry: “Are you alright? You’re looking very peaked.”

A brusque, “Yes,” followed by a hoarse, “no,” was all Ellana managed to utter in the seconds before losing on the battle. She turned, ran, and made it seven steps before vomiting onto the flagstone tiles by the door. Drawing a varied reaction from her advisors, ranging from suspicious silence to abject horror.

The rest of the topics for the meeting were tabled for the day, with the promise to pick back up after her condition improved.

But it never did.

By then, the constant threat of sick pressing at her throat had started to make her nervous to go anywhere for more than an hour — lest she be caught by an attack and end up with a repeat of the afternoon in the war room. In turn, the increase in anxiety only fed her symptoms; made it difficult to keep down whatever she little she did manage to eat during the day. Soon, near impossible to have a meal at all. After a while, not even the tea would sit.

Additionally, her endurance for even the most mundane tasks had begun to wane. She felt winded climbing the stairs, let alone while trying to make it through a training match or battle exercise. Lies and excuses came became a regular part of every conversation she had — I’m not feeling well, I’m just distracted, I didn’t sleep well last night, I haven’t eaten yet today — until she started to forget which ones she’d told what people, and worried she’d start mixing them up.

Paranoia over being caught had her taken to managing the chamber pot herself rather than risk the handmaiden from sensing a pattern and drawing the lines to the easiest conclusion. In fact, she’d taken to managing most of the girl’s duties herself: from drawing baths to helping her with the laundry. Soon, she’d refused nearly all the personal assistance her position awarded her, and the slow decline of her fitness forced her to begin stepping back from anything requiring even the most remote physical activity. As exhaustion turned to weakness, even the regular walks she took around the battlements each day were reduced to nearly zero. All of her habits, haunts and routines crumbled in lieu of either hiding or managing her worsening condition.

She was even forced to stop her cursive practice when her hands began to tremble if she held the quill for too long.

Strangely — gratefully — a rare addition to those long afternoons where she struggled, some
mornings she woke bursting with unexpected vigour. On those days — odd and fleeting though they were — she felt more than simply well but positively electric with restless energy. Her skin was buzzing with it. Surging, swelling, uncomfortable, and... insistent. Begging for movement and action as though she were a tightly-clamped pot under enormous pressure. Ready to boil over if she dared let herself still. She twitched her fingers and tapped her toes and walked in circles while she read books. Annoyed Josephine with bouncing legs while they sat at a desk and discussed communications.

The feeling compelled her: to clean her workspace, organize bookshelves, practice battle forms or simply to go for a brisk walk along the castle ramparts. To seek out Solas’ company and pull him into a darkened hallway for a few stolen moments. Anything to find relief.

Then as suddenly as it came it would be gone again, and she inevitably left in a worse state than she had been in before. Like some sort of energy hangover: she’d asked too much of a limited supply, and it left her body weak and overdrawn.

It was on one such morning that a report came in of possessed wolves causing problems at the small Inquisition post at the bottom of the pass, a little over half a day’s ride from Skyhold. Though she was not asked to assist in dealing with the threat, nor even told about it, she soon caught wind of the message and then took it upon herself to organize a party to dispatch it. Battle was a perfect opportunity to satisfy the itch. This would get her blood pumping. This would prove that she had not grown so worn and weighed by everything that she’d become all but useless as a fighter.

Iron Bull and Sera didn’t seem nearly as thrilled as she was to make their way up and down the steps twice in one day, but kept their complaints to a minimum. Upon reaching the area the report indicated, they tracked the pack to a small glen and spread out to locate and flank them.

Once they were sighted, Ellana’s enthusiasm overpowered her better judgement, and she leapt into action without even bothering to notify her party mates. Nocked a sheaf arrow from the cover a bush and let it fly, readying the next without a second’s pause. It shot clean through the neck of one of the animals as it stopped to scratch an ear; felling it before there was ever a chance to know she was there.

Its fellows, however, were quick to sense they’d been surrounded. The largest of the pack lifted its nose to the sky and howled, alerting any of its nearby kin to converge and attack.

It was only then that she realized her error.

She’d been so eager for action that she’d failed to check her perimeter before engaging the beast — a stupid mistake — and so missed the wolf that had strayed from the pack. It hid on the same ridge she’d used for cover, not 30 feet from her.

Across the clearing, Bull saw the ambush coming a second before the wolf was on her, and it was his curse that alerted her to it, giving her barely enough time to move into a defensive stance. “Vashtoh!” he yelled. “On your right!”

The beast’s jaws came down upon her just as she turned to face it. Sharp teeth found the unprotected gap above her elbow, between her vambraces and rerebraces, and sank deep into her flesh. Pain seared through her wrist and hand, familiar to her as a torn muscle, causing her to drop the arrow she’d nocked. This close, any attack with her bow was useless anyway. One hand still free reached for the dagger sheathed at her hip, and she shouted an Elvish curse as she plunged it into the wolf’s temple.
While a normal creature would succumb easily to such a blow, a possessed one pushed on. Its jaw held fast, pulling and ratting at her arm in turns even as it bled out from the fatal wound she’d inflicted. Its size betrayed the strength the breach had given it, and so even when she planted her feet firmly in the ground between them to hold it back, it unbalanced her easily, flipping her onto her side and dragging her toward a bush as her companions killed the rest of its pack below.

Heart pounding in her ears, she summoned a burst of strength to flip her body and aim a swift kick at the wolf’s exposed chest. An audible crack as her heel met with it told her she’d succeeded in breaking a rib. The shock of which was enough to force the beast to release her with a yelp of pain. Tucking her knees up she leapt backwards, caught herself on her good arm, and rolled into a crouch. With her bow useless to her, and the dagger still lodged in the wolf’s head, she had only a pocket knife left to defend herself, held in her untrained hand. Her wounded arm throbbed with pain.

The beast recovered quickly from the blow and reared back on the offence again, paws dug into the dirt and head bowed low. It bared sharp teeth and loosed a feral snarl no normal wolf could ever hope to imitate, then leapt at her with all the strength of its frenzied rage.

She swept her legs to one side to evade, and heard the snap at her ear as its jaws closed on empty air — mere inches from her head — then struck back with a wide swing of the knife. An attempt to catch its eyes. But it was quicker, and turned into the strike, parrying with its own attack. Both front paws came down hard on her chest, toppling her backwards, and finishing with a bite that tore into her chestpiece.

The loose soil so close to the edge gave way beneath her. Offering no purchase for her hands as she clamoured, uselessly, for a rock or root to save her. A shocked cry rang out as she slipped off the ridge. The fall was not far, no more than 6 or 7 feet, but she landed on her back and the force of the impact knocked her winded. She slid backwards and head-first down into the bush below.

Above her the wolf watched, pacing at the ridge’s edge until she’d come to a stop at the bottom. It crouched, then leapt powerfully.

Still reeling from the fall she could only watch, helpless, as it bore down upon her.

Bull’s axe severed its head from its shoulders a second before it reached her, and its bloodied body fell to the ground next to her in a heap. Blood pouring from its wounds and soaking into her clothes.

In shock, Ellana scrambled to her feet, clutching her wounded arm to staunch the bleeding. Chest heaving and pulse thundering in her ears. Everything had happened so fast. Her legs, shaking from exertion, left her clumsy and slow. She slipped on the soaked ground, gasped and stumbled backwards. Would have fallen over again had Bull not grabbed her shoulder to steady her. In that moment the weight of his hand felt immense, and she felt crushed beneath it from neck to waist; as though she were pinned beneath a boulder. Unable to take a breath.

She struggled to fill her lungs. Each desperate attempt resulting in little more than a shallow, useless gasp, burning her chest and throat like she’d been running for miles. Darkness began to press in at the edges of her vision.

*I can’t breathe. Why can’t I catch my breath?*

Her head swam. *I’m going to pass out,* she realized. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Bull’s grip was too heavy, too hard. She squirmed, but he’d dropped his axe on the ground now and
had put his other hand on her opposite shoulder, holding her in place.

“Breathe slowly,” he ordered, a lone eye trained on her. “Or you’ll hyperventilate.” His voice was firm and clear enough to pierce through the haze.

Adrenaline had her reeling. She’d never been this affected by a battle, even the times they’d been ambushed and cornered.

“Wha—wh—”

*Why is this happening?*

“You’re out of practice,” he supplied, answering the question she couldn’t quite ask. “You’ve been sick for months, and it’s made you weaker.” His voice dropped lower as he leaned closer. “You have different limits now, and you need to learn them if you intend to keep this up for the re—”

Sera’s cry interrupted him.

“What the *fuck* was that?!” She crashed through the underbrush — loud, sweaty, ragged — and looking absolutely furious. “What the fuck! What is wrong with you?!” She threw her bow to the ground and stomped. “You could have gotten us killed by wolves with that shite! And how would that look, huh? Killed by wolves? We’ve fought *dragons!* And won! More than once, even! You didn’t even signal before you started in on that — that was so unbelievably stupid! Why would you do that?”

Only once she paused for breath did she take the time to look at the scene. At Ellana’s stricken expression and Bull’s hands on her, and the bloodied limb in torn armour that was cradled near her middle. The sneer remained, but her ire was tempered by concern now, and her tone softer for it when she spoke again. “You alright?”

“She’s fine, just stunned,” replied Bull before Ellana could make the attempt. “Just got the wind knocked out of her when she fell off the ridge.”

Sera clicked her tongue. Gestured with her chin. “Got your arm, did it?”

This time Bull gave her the chance to answer for herself. “Yes,” she rasped. The answer took more breath than she’d expected, and left her coughing violently. Gagging, when her mouth began to taste of rusted metal. It took what little strength she still had not to double over, and vomit. When she’d recovered, “It’s fine,” she said, “I have a healing potion. We can head back.”

There was a pause before, “Alright,” Sera answered. Still angry, but not so much to be compelled to stay and continue berating The Inquisitor any longer. With a heavy sigh, she turned and headed back toward the road. Calling out behind her, “Let’s go back, then!”

Ellana lingered another moment to finish catching her breath before taking a vial from a pouch on her side, and downing the potion in a single swallow. It worked quickly; muscles mending while torn skin knit itself closed atop it. She hissed, and pulled aside the torn vambrace for a better look at the closing wound — it always hurt when the punctures were deep. When the effect of the potion faded she ran her fingers over the scar, inspecting tender new skin that still prickled with the memory of the wolf’s teeth.

Furious as Sera was with her, she was even more so with herself. Disappointed, and embarrassed; cursing the foolish impulse had led her to act without thinking.

When she looked up, she found Bull still standing nearby. Arm’s crossed over his chest, watching
“You should see a healer,” he said, and he held her eye just long enough for it to feel uncomfortable before his gaze flicked down to her scarred forearm. “Don’t be stupid.”

Then he too turned and left.

That night she dreamed and blood and wolves. Of cowering, terrified, from howls that pierced the night and went on for hours. There was a tree, or a bush, with thick branches that made for a poor hiding place. She was cold and hungry, but too afraid to wander. There was red upon the road. On her hands, and her clothes. Blood, belonging to a figure that lay on the ground just outside of her hiding place: a woman — dead, cold, and stiff. Her face — partially hidden beneath matted locs of dark, curled, hair — stared back: blank, and featureless.

Ellana woke in a sweat.

She didn’t tend to any more threat reports personally, after that.

However, she didn’t take Bull’s advice either. Not for her arm, nor for her overall health, even as it continued to decline.

In the days following the debacle, Vivienne made an idle comment about how gaunt she’d been looking since her return from the Mire, and when Ellana brushed her off the enchanter went over her head. Bringing her concerns directly to Josephine. No telling what she’d said, but clearly, it made an impact: the ambassador went beyond her duties and immediately arranged for an appointment with one of Skyhold’s resident healers. Ellana didn’t show, and so Josie brought the request straight to her door. A surprise she met one morning when a healer accosted her in the hall outside her room with the intent to lead her to the clinic.

It was a briefly terrifying experience: a human man in simple robes insisting she follow so he could examine her… Until it became clear that nobody suspected the cause of her malaise was pregnancy, and instead were becoming concerned she had contracted some sort of wasting disease and was actually dying.

Were she honest with herself, she’d admit that offered some relief.

It was only then that she developed an inkling of how she may need to reframe the way she’d been thinking about the situation.

She successfully avoided the next several attempts Josephine made to set appointments, and believed herself free of them after one particular man said something entirely unpleasant about stubborn knife-ears and cautioned the ambassador to give up trying to persuade her to cooperate.

The last healer, however, she was not able to avoid as easily. That one was brought by Leliana.

A knock came in the evening this time, catching her off-guard. Upon opening the door Ellana met her Spymaster standing behind a short, older, human woman in a long coat. Her arms were crossed and face blank. Even before she spoke a word she’d managed to make the encounter incredibly intimidating.

“This is Helena,” Leliana said, and her voice was not gentle. “She is a healer from outside of Skyhold. I have known her some time, and have hired her services regularly. She is well-versed in the care of both humans and elves. I trust her: she is knowledgeable, and she is discrete.”
The woman pushed past Ellana before she had the time to speak a greeting (or dismissal, as it were), and began ascending the stairs. “A pleasure, Inquisitor,” she hailed. Dryly, like it was an afterthought. Clearly she’d been briefed ahead of time about how uncooperative her patient would be. Once she disappeared beyond the stairs Ellana could hear her rearranging pillows on the bed to clear a space. Like she’d been invited in to make herself at home.

She turned to her advisor, “Leliana, this—” but was cut off.

“She is discrete.”

There was a finality in the words that told her this was no request. It was enough to silence any further protest.

Cowled, Ellana nodded. Watching as the Spymaster turned and left the tower without another word. If there was any comfort to gain from this, it was the knowledge that Leliana would be true to the unspoken promise of her own silence. Whatever was revealed in the next moments, she’d not push for answers from her. As an advisor, she’d need only the reassurance of the Inquisitor’s ability to continue performing her duties, or at least return to them soon with some course of treatment. Leliana could be many things, but loyal above all — and she would never compromise the trust put in her.

A notion which sat uncomfortably cold in Ellana’s gut after having spent so much time lying by omission.

She closed the door, but lingered just inside until the healer lost patience with waiting for her to come to her senses. Calling out, “This part requires your presence dear, best climb up and join me.”

Begrudgingly, she obliged. Making her way up the stairs and toward her bed with the solemn determination of a man marched to the gallows.

The woman — Helena, Leliana had said — was old and small. Deep wrinkles lined her forehead, cheeks and eyes, and she stood with a hunch that spoke of decades spent toiling over tables and patients. Her hands shook at rest, but her work was sure and fast as she unpacked a small bag of tools. Her experience and confidence in her skills were clear; she’d prepared a number of small vials in anticipation of the visit ahead of time, each filled with colourful liquid and sealed with a waxed cork. Remedies for disease, flu and injury. Ellana only recognized a few as tonics she’d used on the battlefield, the rest were likely too specific, and so unfamiliar.

The exam began the moment Ellana lowered herself upon the bed. Not a second was spared for pleasantries or tact; the woman immediately launched into a list of questions about recent travel, local flora, what sorts of foods were eaten in what areas, and how many skirmishes were fought that resulted in injury. All the while she poked and prodded, pinched at her skin, tapped and palpated. There was an instruction to raise her arms so she could feel her ribs, then put an ear to her chest to listen to her breathe. A knock on her bones with a crooked knuckle to check for sore points. Inquiries about the origins of a few old scars, while carefully avoiding much of the one cut into her left palm.

She was not gentle: rough, calloused hands grabbed and pulled. Unbuttoned a sleeve without asking and pulled Ellana’s collar down without offering her the chance to do it herself. Helena handled her like she were one in a line of hundreds she’d have to see that day, and did not seem to care much about showing the ‘proper respect’ for the position. It was a relief, in many ways; if the woman hadn’t put her on a pedestal she couldn’t possibly fall from it.
Throughout, the questions continued.

Do you have any strange bites or lumps? No.

Any wounds slow to heal? Not that I’m aware.

A rash? Nowhere.

Did you eat or drink anything new or interesting? Nothing I’d not had before.

Did you find anything on this journey you’d not encountered previously? All was as expected.

Were you given a gift, or did anything out of the ordinary enter your possession? Not to my knowledge.

Did you meet or dine with any new people? None.

All the while the confession sat upon her lips. Almost free, only to be dashed away by some fretful notion each time she’d prepared to speak it aloud. This woman would be the first she’d told, other than Solas. Dorian didn’t count. And though she trusted what Leliana had said about her skill, as well as her tongue, disclosing the condition to someone else still proved to be a difficult hurdle. The conversation that followed it would be the first of many she’d have.

She’d almost worked up the gumption to reveal it on her own when Helena forced her hand with the offhand question, “When was your last bleed?” Straight and to the point: not at all like Dorian’s attempt to wheedle the information out of her.

It took long enough for Ellana to answer that the healer paused her work, straightened her crooked back, and gave her a quizzical look.

“Three moons back,” she said at last, and watched the woman’s brows climb to her hairline. Adding a belated, “I think,” and an embarrassed, “I didn’t really pay attention.”

“Oh,” said Helena, after a moment. “Well, that would do it.” She switched gears immediately. Ordered, “Lie down,” and patted the bed. “I’ll need to confirm it if I can.”

Ellana did as she was bid. Slowly, and with her heart in her throat. Dread was a palpable thing: for the inevitable fallout of having revealed such a salacious secret. It was out now. Someone else had heard a truth as dangerous as any blade. And surely she’d endure the first wave of disapproval, one of many that would follow. Already she could hear Keeper’s voice in her ear chiding her for her reckless heart and loose skirts. The indignant question of how a woman in such a position of responsibility could take the risks she had.

It was something of a surprise that it never came.

Instead, the healer woman merely began asking a different set of questions. Much more intimate in nature than the previous ones, of course, but no less utilitarian.

Are your breasts tender?

How long have you been suffering the sickness?

Any other unusual symptoms you’ve noticed?

Have you always been so thin?
For every answer Ellana gave, the healer took a moment to repeat it back to herself and commit it to memory; each providing a small piece toward the solution of the puzzle. One she’d no doubt completed a hundred times before, now practised and expedient at the calculations required.

“Can you narrow it down any further?” Helena asked after a time, firmly tugging Ellana’s breeches down over her hips. The woman’s fingers dug deep into the flesh of her middle, into the tender space her womb occupied, just above her pelvic bone. Where Solas’ hands had been when he’d first felt whatever flutter now lived within. The probe was insistent — as she, too, searched — and rough enough to draw a gasp as she winced from discomfort. Being so unapologetically manhandled was not something she was accustomed to.

“Come now, it’s not so bad,” Helena chastised under her breath. Then reminded, “I asked a question!”

An answer to which proved a challenge, when it occurred to her what the timing might reveal. While there were many men who kept permanent space in and around Skyhold between the soldiers, merchants and civilian workers, there was really only a few dozen she interacted with on a regular basis. Ultimately, as a healer the woman needed to know; she might as well give her the other answers she required with as little meddling as possible.

“Before Kingsway,” Ellana finally replied. “It would have been before I left for the last journey.”

“Hm,” the woman pondered. If the timing offered her any opinions on parentage, she did not give voice to them. “August? Or before?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?” answered Ellana honestly. She’d not left Skyhold for more than a few days at a time in the many months before the trip. And on many of the nights she spent in the fortress…

It would be hard to pin down a precise date.

Helena turned her hand to one side and pressed it down deep, just below Ellana’s navel, rocking it back and forth as though measuring with the cup of her palm. A moment later, she smiled. Made a satisfying little click of her tongue. “Ah-ha! Found you,” she murmured. “Less than five, more than two. A bit here. Feels like perhaps three or four.”

“Excuse me?”

And she laughed. “Months, girl. Worry not, you won’t have a litter! Rare even for twins with your little bodies.” A pinch was given to her side — a gesture uncomfortably familiar, and maternal, for a woman she’d only just barely met. “Only seen it once in all my years. Humans though, much more common — once had a mother with four! She was a right miserable sight. Like a bitch full of puppies, that one.”

“Oh.” The relief was enough to drown out any embarrassment. “Of course.”

There came another long pause as Helena thought. Narrow eyes turned upward, muttering to herself in a barely audible whisper. Words that fell deaf upon human ears, but not so for an elf’s; she counted backwards through the calendar, calculating.

Then thin lips curled in a half-cocked, knowing smile. “Ahh!” The wrinkles at the corners of her eyes creased as she turned her gaze back to her patient. “During that envoy from Orlais, was it? I was here for that, getting supplies from the merchants that came with them.” There was a rather unflattering assumption within the statement. Especially when followed up with a single raised
brow and, “You wouldn’t be the first. Handsome folk, those Orlesians. Suspect someone leaves a bastard behind most places they visit.”

Ignoring the slight was best if there was any indication she’d be creating some sort of professional relationship with this woman.

The timing was wrong, though. Solas was gone for most of that week, and the days following had been stressful. Busy, ridiculous, and exhausting. Even if they had not been run ragged by the festivities, the swell in activity made it nearly impossible to find the privacy necessary to sneak him into her room — or vice versa — without drawing attention to themselves. They had not even bothered to try. Aside, she was fairly sure she’d been on her blood during the height of it.

So, “No,” she replied. “It would have been later than that.”

Helena frowned, as though she took offence at the idea the guess was wrong. “Hmm”. Dug her fingers in again.

Ellana tried to get ahead of her next guess, but so many of those days and nights had blurred together in the months that passed since. Perhaps if she had Josephine’s schedule archives in front of her she could start going down the list to try and see if any particular dates rang a bell.

But…

There was one specific afternoon.

It was a few weeks after the Orlesians left. The tryst that took place on that day stood out in her memory as Solas was not what one would call an adventurous lover, and greatly valued their discretion. Beyond their first night he was always careful to ensure they were not seen visiting or leaving each other’s rooms at certain hours, nor standing too close, or acting too familiar.

Conversations were calculated, though oft peppered with coy flirting when they were out of earshot of others.

On that day, the flirtation had started in the morning and never ceased; they’d found little time together in the previous weeks and were, perhaps, too eager to engage. It moved beyond a simple game of cat-and-mouse when Solas began to tempt her with certain Elvish words and phrases she’d only just recently persuaded him to teach her, dropping in a few more suggestive comments to throw her off guard when she’d teased him. A touch of her arm here, a brush of his thigh there. Almost a kiss, as they passed through a hall. Somehow — though she could not quite remember what actions had ultimately broken his resolve — they found themselves making use of a dusty table for something it most certainly was not intended for, in a lower archive she’d not previously known existed before she’d had this urgent need of it.

In retrospect, it was a miracle they were not caught.

The date might fit, based on Helena’s estimates. And it would be terribly fitting if the last time they did something dangerous and impulsive it led to…

Well.

Something dangerous and impulsive.

“I think, maybe, it was a few weeks after that.”

Helena narrowed an eye. “Is he human?”
It was not the question she’d expected to follow. “…Why?”

“Professional curiosity. I find elves often carry higher when they’ve laid with a human,” the healer informed. Then, pitched her voice lower, “Not the Qunari, is it?”

“No!” replied Ellana with a laugh. There was really only one Qunari in Skyhold that she spent any time around, and no secret that he was already paired off. The fact that Helena still made the effort not to name him directly was a little amusing.

“Good!”

Before there was a chance to question what prejudice had prompted such an answer, the woman added, “Tough ones, those. Elfmaid isn’t built for that: the babes are too big, and only get bigger. You’ll never see a harder birth. Many don’t make it.”

“Oh.” It was all she could think to say in response to that terrifying thought. “…he—he’s very tall.” For an elf, she left unsaid.

At that, Helena finally ceased her prodding and tugged Ellana’s breeches back up, indicating she was done with that part. While she buttoned her clothes, the healer pulled a notebook from a pocket of her coat and began to write. Again, the quiet muttering gave Ellana an insight on what notes she took. She heard as much as, ‘August’, ‘two fingerswidth’, and, ‘fathered’ before the colour drained from her face.

Helena caught the shift immediately, and flashed a smile over the top of the book. “It’s for my own memory,” she assured. “Your name won’t be on it. None are. If I died today and my bags raided for coin, not a soul would know it was you.”

Though it eased her mind, it wasn’t quite enough to quell the churning of her stomach that kicked up with the beat of her heart. The day had been a particularly challenging one for her sickness and it took precious little to send her reaching for the chamber pot beneath her bed. As was her new normal, she’d not managed to eat enough to give much substance to the attack, but it did not make the experience any less unpleasant. And embarrassing. When there was nothing left to lose, bile and acid came next. Each roll burned like fire, wearing her throat and sinus raw.

When it was over, and she was left gasping, Helena’s hand extended to offer her a kerchief. She took it gratefully.

“Nightingale said you’ve been ill most days, most hours,” she commented. Her voice was softer now; more gentle than it had been since they’d met. “Has it been this way since you knew?”

Nodding, “Mhm,” affirmed Ellana in a hum.

“Has it bettered at all?”

That got a weak laugh. “Feels like it’s got worse every day. Nothing seems to help it. I’d no idea it could be like this. I don’t know how other women endure it, multiple times even! Is there something you can suggest? At this point I’d take anything, I can barely make it through a few hours. Sometimes just the thought of eating is enough to do it, let alone actually trying to. I’d be starved if I wasn’t so repulsed.”

It was a little unsettling the way the healer’s smile quirked only one corner of her lips. Didn’t quite reach her eyes, though she didn’t quite make the effort. A comforting bedside manner wasn’t one of her strengths, it seemed.
“For most, teas and brews can do the trick. Others, a change in diet eases it. Some struggle regardless. But there’s an unfortunate few that suffer something different.” She extended a finger and thumb, and pinched the skin on the underside of Ellana’s arm. Loose and fragile from the weight loss and poor nutrition she’d endured as the weeks wore on without reprieve. “Up in Tevinter they call it something fancy, but down here we just say it’s terrible. I’ve not seen often, but when I do it’s always a sorry circumstance. My sympathies are with you, Inquisitor — there are only a few ways to best it.”

That didn’t feel encouraging. “Which are?”

Helena picked up the medicine bag and began to rummage through it. “A grateful few can wait it out, and find it eases half-way through. But you’ll take a beating for it, and that can be dangerous. You’d need to work hard to get back your strength back in time for the birth. But for those who find it only worsens”— A small vial was pulled from a pocket, filled with a viscous black liquid, and placed in Ellana’s hand. “—drink a spoonful every four hours until it’s all gone, do it slowly so you keep as much as you can down. Witherstalk and cohosh. What comes next will hurt, but be over in a day or two. I can give you something for the pain, as well. Don’t know what your plans are, but I’ll be available regardless.”

It took a moment for her to realize what had been implied. “Ah,” she said flatly. “Alright.” That felt wrong: like acceptance. She clarified, “I understand.”

There’d barely been time to fully accept the fact that she was pregnant at all, amid everything else. This was… not something she had thought about. She’d not thought too much about any part of anything. And now the two conflicting ideas had somehow stopped her ability to think at all. Holding the vial, she felt only indifference toward it, and wondered if there should be something else there instead. There was neither fear nor relief. Not even vague alarm. Did that mean something in itself?

Seemingly oblivious, Helena continued to fish through her bag of supplies and eventually found few more vials to offer. She handed them over one by one. “Can try these but I offer no promises. One spoon each, but not all at the same time. They’ll make you tired, so best save them for evenings if you can. Not much else I can offer, I’m afraid.”


Surely any of these would be better than nothing at all.

“Thank you.”

“If you still have need of me I can come back in two months’ time. Nightingale can call for me. Was there anything else?” The woman was clinical, though not cold. Nor was she unkind. Merely unmoved; neither the patient nor the plight seemed to concern her in any way beyond professional interest. Just a humble healer with other places to be.

Ellana imagined she would feel grateful for that when the ability returned. “Will you— I mean, you work for—”

A hand raised, cutting her off. “Confidential. I tell Nightingale only if you’re dead and unable to tell her yourself. I’d not inform you were she with child, and I have no business telling her of your being.”

A question still nagged her, and the one boon the shock gave her was the ability to ask it. “Does she know already?”
Helena shrugged, entirely uninterested in the implication. “Wouldn’t have that answer, Herald — but she’d have no business telling me if she did.”

Of course.

“You said,” quipped Helena as she re-packed her bag. Belted, then heaved it over one shoulder. It clanked and tinkled with the sound of metal and glass as the tools within shifted.

Before leaving, she put a hand on Ellana’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. It was by far the most gentle touch she’d shown that evening. The hand remained until she’d caught her attention properly, at which point she offered the single, poignant, piece of advice she possessed that was worthy of passing on.

“Give it time. You’d not hate your friend if they gave you a scare, but you’d still scream when you got it. Your heart’s still pounding — it’ll settle.”

At some point, she descended the stairs and shut the door behind her… though Ellana could only distantly recall hearing the wood hit the frame and nothing else that followed it. By the time she had the wherewithal to collect up the vials and rise from her bed, the candles had nearly burned down. Wax pooling in the silver holders so deep that it overflowed and spilt upon the desk.

The very expensive desk.

A once ornate piece now marred by quill scratches, ink stains, candle wax and water rings. An unapologetic display of neglect. Looking around, she saw there was not much in the room she’d bothered to take good care of. Everything was dented, damaged, chipped or scratched. Even the Orlesian couch with the fine fabric she could never remember the name of, the one she almost never touched simply out of fear of harming it, had loose threads and a crack in one leg from when she’d risen from it too quickly and scooted it over a bump in the stone floor.

She’d never had anything to take care of before this castle, and all the pretty things that filled it. Gifts, bribes, offerings and frilly decor she should have paid more respect toward.

*If she could not even be bothered to hold these beautiful things dear…*

The vial of dark ichor was a burning brand in her palm. More painful than the burden of the anchor’s tear.

An uncomfortable, anxious knot formed in her chest. Stole her next breath with a skipped heartbeat. She struggled to swallow it down, but the sensation stubbornly refused to abide her. With sudden aplomb, she crossed the room, from her bed to the desk now covered in wax, and threw open the long top drawer. Inside were all manner of notes and maps, a few failed attempts at floral sketches, and a silver key. She dropped all the vials atop them, and shut them away with enough force for the slam to echo in the empty room.

But her fingers lingered on the handle for the space of a breath.

Then two.

And she opened it again.

Took out the key, then the black vial, and threw it the bottom drawer of the left-side of the desk instead. Shut it, locked it, stowed the key in the top drawer, and retreated three steps back.
Standing still as stone in the middle of the room.

Silent, but for her heaving breath.

Even with her eyes squeezed shut and all her will focused on conquering the guilty tremor of her hands, her heart still beat at her throat.

“It can’t hurt you in the drawer,” said a familiar voice.

To her credit, she didn’t jump or cry out, though his sudden appearance still gave her a start. Every time she told herself she’d be able to anticipate his next visit, and still, he always managed to arrive when she did not expect it. Always too wrapped up in whatever had drawn him there in the first place.

Opening her eyes, she found Cole seated on the desk before her. His hands clasped demurely between his knees, ankles crossed, with his gaze cast upon the floor. Hiding beneath the brim of his oversized hat.

The next breath was deep and measured. “I know,” she replied, swallowing past the lump in her throat.

He looked so small and fragile this way, but his words were always so sure. “It wasn’t real until she gave you a choice. Ignored, ignorant, but inevitable. I don’t know how to do this.”

His eyes lifted from the floor and met with her own. Searching. Brows raised in surprise as he caught upon a thread he’d not expected. Then lowered, deep, in sympathy.

“It doesn’t mean you’d be a bad mother.”

Tears never used to come to her so quickly. It was uncomfortable: the ease of which she found herself in this state, struggling against the tide. She tried to force a laugh, but could only choke out a bitter scoff. “Doesn’t it?”

“No,” Cole replied, perhaps more eager than the situation called for. He wanted to help. “They all wonder. Even Ilse—” A woman from her clan. Some memory he’d found of a middle-aged mother of many; always so calm and confident with her brood of children. She took care of others as well as her own, and never seemed to have a sore word to say about it. “—Every time she feared there was not enough to go around. There is only so much of me. All of them are scared.” He frowned.

“There are a lot of things to be scared of.”

Cole had been part of the Inquisition for some time now, and still, it was largely a mystery where he pulled his knowledge from. How much was intuition, and how much innate ability; if he tapped into some invisible connections when it was required, or collected it all somewhere along the way. Still, “Did you know before I did?” she asked.

He blinked wide eyes. Clearly surprised by her question.

“You didn’t know.”

That was… fair, she supposed. If not predictably cryptic.

“He’s scared too,” Cole added when she offered nothing more in reply. “Nervous, new, it should come naturally, but never has. I cannot remember how to cradle a child.”

He spoke in such a perfect imitation of Solas’ cadence that she could almost hear him saying the
words himself, though doubted he would admit such things aloud. Even to her. This was still too fragile — too new — and he so timid when it came to such vulnerability.

“He would if you asked.”

A startled laugh slipped out amid a fall of tears, and she wiped them from her cheeks. It was too easy to forget her inner thoughts were not her own in Cole’s presence; he did not come to her like this often.

The spirit continued, “He blames himself for your suffering. Nothing I can offer eases her sickness. Is this because of me? Because I am—”

“Stop,” she cut in. This felt too personal to receive from the mouth of another. And she too raw to hear it so plainly.

Cole obliged the heart of her request, but did not relent. Switching to his own voice instead. “You don’t have to be apart. Alone and apprehensive. It would help.”

She knew what he was implying. A tempting thought, but one she wouldn’t entertain: it was rare she went to Solas’ room, rather than he find a way to hers. His ability to evade detection was masterful — and probably magic-related — even her lifetime of experience hunting and hiding was no match for whatever skills he employed to successfully get past any guard posted in the hall when he left her room before dawn.

Additionally, if he had not come to her door yet this evening he was unlikely to come at all. Allowing her the time to rest, he’d said when she inquired about the less frequent visits. A well-intentioned, though unbeloved solution to her exhaustion that left her evenings free to spend resting, should she wish to.

“Not now,” Cole commented innocently, providing a curious answer to a question she’d not asked. “When he comes back.”

That gave her pause, it was unlike him to still be at work in the rotunda at this hour. “To his room?”

“To Skyhold.”

In the silence that followed the admission his face fell.

“I don’t think I was supposed to tell you that,” he added belatedly.

Chapter End Notes

“In Tevinter” they’d call it hyperemesis gravidarum. It affects about 1% of pregnant women, is not morning sickness, and could end in death. We have medications to ‘help’ it nowadays, if you are fortunate to respond well to them. But it is severe enough that therapeutic abortion is still a common, though necessary, treatment. http://helpher.org/ — FACT: if you know someone who suffers with it, make sure you don’t offer them soda crackers. This grants them the immediate right to kill you with full legal immunity.

I have a plot point I’m making about it but it’ll take the next chapter or so to get there.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sound of a book, thrown in anger, striking the floor before skidding to a stop against a marble statue broke the months of silence that had preceded it. The impact echoed in the empty realm; a lonely note with only a single pair of ears to hear.

Solas was not prone to such displays. He was wiser. Better, than to lose his temper and demean himself by behaving as a petulant child would when they succumbed to frustration.

But this? This had worn him down.

Days and nights equivalent worth of time spent in the shattered remains of the Vir Dirthara. Searching, reading, thinking, hoping. Desperate, and growing increasingly more so each time he returned to Skyhold with nothing to show for his quest but empty hands and wasted time. The frustration finally proved too much when yet another lead turned false. A promising one, he’d thought — perhaps naively.

Or perhaps this task had begun to drive him mad.

He slid to the floor, defeated. Dragging himself down the side of a bookshelf that dug uncomfortably into his back when he came to rest at its base, head in hands. This wall was all but empty now. Its former contents laying in a spray upon the floor at his feet. Each book removed one by one over the hours and evenings he’d spent secreted away. Stacked neatly at first, given the respect they were due, but as the nights wore on without progress he began dropping them into jumbled towers that tilted and fell into piles like so much refuse. The last dozen he’d read through were face down upon the floor, spines bent, carelessly discarded once he browsed them far enough to know they offered him nothing. Then he’d reach for the next.

How can there possibly be so much, yet offer so little?

Each successive evening of failure brought his fear and doubt into sharper focus. A dire omen looming in the periphery of his thought like a gathering storm: that what he sought could not be found. This archive held mostly knowledge of old; that of Elvhenan, Arlathan, and the thousands of years worth of culture, art and history that the empire had amassed. There were entire rooms of tomes devoted to a single epoch, but precious little of what came after he raised the Veil and tore this place, and the world, asunder.

He’d found an abundance of records on the corporealization of spirits, birth in its dual forms, procreation between Elvhen and what few complications arose from it. Where spirits took form and how others assisted in the crossing over… but there was virtually nothing relevant to his plight. To Ellana’s plight. Just a few, scattered, bindings filled with faded pages and vaguely whispered memories of the first few generations that came after the raising.

And thus far, what little he’d gleaned from those was not what he’d hoped to find.

Following the division of Waking and Dreaming, the surviving Elvhen did not venture far from their homelands for hundreds of years. Fear and confusion kept them close to the ruins like little birds too young to leave their nests. It was only the next generations that felt compelled to explore the new world. Still Elf, yet different from their parents in ways they did not yet understand, they
set out on their own to forge a new destiny. They were long-lived, but slow to master their skills: they struggled to wield fire and ice with the same ease their kin displayed — and the further they drifted from their ancestral home the less powerful they became.

At first it was the distance they blamed, then the loss of the spaces between to find their way back, but it did not take long for them to realize the heart of the matter: that they’d been born incomplete. Magic did not flow so easily in this world as it had in the one previous, and they were not immune to this as beings born of it. Each new generation possessed less and less prowess, until non-mages began to emerge. Not simply unable to wield the gifts inherent to their existence, but devoid of the magical talent entirely.

Worse, without the connection they began to age. To wither, and sicken, and die.

The first true ancestors of modern elves.

Believed a blight, they were cast out, and the remaining Elvhen went into hiding. Or chose to drift into endless sleep. And like the world that they’d lost, one people were sundered in two. Over the millennia that followed knowledge was lost, history forgotten, and language evolved, until elves and Elvhen became different races entirely… and mages were an uncommon occurrence in the new people. Dreamers: practically non-existent.

There was virtually no record he could find of the two groups intermingling.

More to the point, of the effects it could have on the mortal mother that carried a child born of this union.

It was an impossible notion: outliers existed in all places, in all of history. Even if the idea of such couplings had become so taboo that their occurrence was rare, that was hardly damning evidence that it did not happen at all.

Where there was existence, there was memory. From memory, begat history; and there would be the records it carved. There he would find the knowledge he sought. Hidden somewhere and awaiting discovery, of that he was certain. And so returned night after night in search of it.

Surely here in this library full of all the collected knowledge of his people and the eons of their empirical study there would be something.

Some treatment. Some therapy. Some ritual to mitigate the danger inherent in creating an immortal life with a mortal body.

Anything.

But what memories of the new world that existed in this place were as fragmented and confused as the spirits who tended to them.

Those few leads he’d found were faded, like old tracks he could almost follow onto a path before losing his way, making the task all the more maddening. One in particular showed early promise: a partial memory of one Elvhen man’s turmoil over falling in love with a mortal elf, and his grief over the knowledge that he could not create children with them.

Why? What caused this to be a foregone conclusion? Was it injury, age, sickness? Or something more innate?

There has to be more here!
It proved irrelevant when his lover turned out to be male as well: reproduction was not possible between same-sex partners in this world, nor would it have been possible for them regardless if they weren’t both Elvhen. An all-together different tragedy.

A few tomes he unearthed a week later contained vague references to the surviving People’s awareness of unions between mortals and Elvhen. Unfortunately, those whose memories wrote them held either distain or indifference for the idea, and so lacked any finer understanding that might otherwise have helped him.

But the fact that they existed at all was encouraging.

Post-Veil collected history he’d exhausted before he’d ever thought to come here. Combing Skyhold’s archives as well as book lists from libraries in Tevinter, Orlais, Kirkwall, Starkhaven and Nevarra. He’d devoted days to it. Ultimately, none contained any writings pertaining to ancient elves that were remotely useful. Nor even accurate. It was all hearsay, legend, and folklore. Even to Tevinter, the oldest human connection with Elvhen, his kind were a myth at best; mere whispers until the Inquisition met the sentinels left behind at the Temple of Mythal. What record he found of birth among those first encountered by Humans, generations removed from his kin, were related to conquer and slavery… and too reprehensible to endure learning more of.

This night, like so many previous, went to waste following the thread of a sort of journal: a record created by another Elvhen man. But rather than grief for a family he’d not have he wrote instead of long-lived — though ultimately mortal — children born of a mortal woman he could not bring himself to name. There was sadness in his heart, and a sense of inevitability, though for what remained unclear. The era it originated in was unknown, but unlikely to have come from a time following the migration and settling of human tribes, which pointed toward a time period around the first thousand years after the raising. It was this Solas was aiming for, as it was the most probable time to contain what he was after: Elf with Elvhen.

Infuriatingly, the journal proved… incomplete. There was no other word to describe it. Large sections made blank by gaps in memory, time, or some outside force whose effects he did not understand. These tomes were not made of parchment and leather and yet it was as though pages had been torn from them just the same. What remained was faded, like old writing and distracted thought. Summoning the focus to pull forth any tangible information from it took hours of meditation, and what he gleaned was barely worth the effort.

Imagery that was fleeting and puzzling.

A woman, fevered, and a fixation of the width of her wrist. A smile that always curled one corner of her mouth higher than the other, and how endearing her lover found it. Her sleeping form curled around a swaddled bundle on a bed of straw and animal furs. The smell of old blood and sweat, like an animal’s den. A whispered curse, when her attempt to light a fire by spell alone could not be summoned from her hand, and the magic fizzled in her palm.

Scenes from a tapestry wove of any life, any love. There was nothing here to gain. And when his frustration got the better of him he’d thrown the book away. Leaving him adrift once more in the oppressive silence of this broken place.

That an act of such unrepentant temper drew the attention of Study came as a surprise. Though perhaps it should not have… after all it was a spirit who, not unlike Cole, was drawn to the satisfaction of helping others find answers. Insight, if not resolution.

“Do you require assistance?” he heard it ask in Elvish.
Study floated idly before him, curious and innocent in its ethereal form. No emotion drove its inquiry; it was not moved by his plight, nor worried over his turmoil. It sought only the reward of knowledge guided and shared. And so, he did not bother to hide from it the tremor in his voice when he answered.

“I do not believe you can help me,” Solas replied. Then, in Common, “I fear the answers I was looking for may not exist. I had thought — had hoped — that I may find them here, in spite of that. But I am afraid I was mistaken. I seek knowledge, old, but from a time after the raising of the Veil. Shared between Elf and Elvhen in what scarce connection they had.”

The spirit followed his lead and spoke in a mix of both languages in its next reply. “Here lies the collected memories from before the Veil was cast. What came after, what was not so easily saved, may be found with my kin.”

He scoffed. “I have my doubts the facets of Study that reside here will be able to help me any more than you can, my friend.”

“Seek Knowledge, true,” it replied flatly, as if this answer were so obvious. “There lies what has not yet been curated.”

It shouldn’t have — he should have been better than to allow it — but the reply rankled. Irritation lent a sharp edge to his voice. “I have searched the knowledge that is held here and it has provided nothing of use to me!”

Infuriating — it did not understand the query and gave him only riddles in return.

This is pointless.

The echo of his own shout informed him of how harsh his voice had become when he lost his temper. Recognizing this, he paused for deep breath. Centred himself. The spirit’s shortcomings were not its fault. Study was a mere shade of its former self, with only a fraction of its faculties still left. It would not possibly understand the gravity of what was at stake, or how long he’d struggled for answers already. The onus was on him to make his requests more simple.

He sighed. “My apologies for the outburst, my quarrel is not with you.”

In its broken state, it was neither offended nor discouraged by his ire. “Knowledge,” it repeated. “Apologies. Apologies. I cannot offer more.”

“You are fine as you are,” he assured. One hand raised to halt any further attempts it may make toward amends. “I merely—”

Knowledge.

It struck him sure as any blow. The shift between dialects wasn’t only to complement his own habit of switching between them, and he’d missed the more subtle inflection as a result.

Eolas.

He repeated the word back to the spirit, with Elvish emphasis on it as a title rather than an idea. “Knowledge?” When Study did not reply, he clarified, “Seek Knowledge?”

“Knowledge true,” it replied in his mother tongue, once more taking his cue. “Knowledge gathers what the Library lacks; passes on what it gleans from memory and experience of the People. It assists in the creation of what tomes you find in this place. Knowledge helped to shape the library,
but has been silent for so long.”

A spirit! Ancient, surely — but powerful, and familiar. No closer brothers were there but Wisdom and Knowledge. And Wisdom had remained his oldest friend until they perished. That familiarity could guide him to its kin.

“Where?” He was on his feet in an instant. It was the best lead he had by far. “Where can I find Knowledge?”

“Unknown.”

Of course. The Veil severed the library’s connection to the rest of the Dreaming long ago. There was no way for Study, nor any denizen of these places between, to have the faintest idea of the location of any being outside of them today. At best it might hold a vague memory of what spaces it once preferred, thousands of years prior. Not terribly helpful when dealing a spirit as fluid and eager as Knowledge could be. While he’d not met it previously, an educated guess told him it was unlikely to still be lingering in its ancient haunts after all this time.

Although…

Perhaps there were still breadcrumbs left to follow.

“Do you know where they used to be?”

Seeking Knowledge proved a much more difficult challenge than finding Wisdom.

When his friend still lived, he had only to enter the Fade in sleep and recall their studious nature to be drawn together. It mattered not where they’d come to rest, or explore, since the last time he sought them: their connection through a long friendship gifted him an easy path to follow. Furthermore, Wisdom wanted to be found. It was Wisdom’s purpose: to be obtained, discussed, shared, and beloved. Their presence in the Fade was magnetic and intriguing, and the quiet power they’d achieved over eons of existence gave them the experience to pose no threat to those few that sought them out. It made it an easy enough task to find them, when he wanted to.

The more chaotic entities, those more dangerous like spirits of Desire or Rage, were even more conspicuous. They possessed an aggressive need to seek their quarry; an existence reduced to hunting mages and Dreamers for a taste of influence, with hope of possession to grow their power. They made their presence known through a mix of gaudy temptation and invasive prowling, always watching for a flare of uncontrolled magic or emotion to latch onto and pull themselves in. One did not seek them out, as much as they found you first.

Such spirits were plentiful, but Solas had more than enough experience and wit to avoid them and make himself unappetizing while he, too, searched.

But Knowledge, as it happened, was elusive. Oddly so.

There were no threads to follow from the Vir Dirthara; if any once existed, they’d long been cut. Study offered few clues to go on other than the vague suggestion to search for the spirit in places deep, and old, where ancient things lie untouched by time and dominion. And undiscovered
knowledge was ripe for the taking. Few such places now existed in Thedas, and rarer still were those Solas could easily travel to for the purposes of his quest. His time was precious: limited not just by the gradual decline of Ellana’s health but the more pressing fact the longer he stayed away the more likely someone was to notice.

Searching beyond the Library required leaving this plane and moving to a different physical location to enter the Fade. It required finding and dreaming at these places, or near enough to them that he could feel the impressions they left upon the Veil and step inside their memories.

And such places were only reached by way of Eluvians or other, more traditional, means of travel. Which could potentially take hours, or even days, if they were far enough away.

A complication… as he had chosen not to share any of this with Ellana.

Nor had he thought to sell her a plausible lie to cover for his absence, should she discover it.

The hours he spent each night in the library after she retired for the evening were no challenge to hide. A mix of exhaustion and the disinclination to visit him at his door made it easy to slip in and out of his room without alerting her — but potentially travelling for days through the network of mirrors would not go unnoticed. When she realized he’d disappeared she would be furious, and if he was gone long enough she might go to her advisors for assistance in finding him.

It was a calculated risk, but one he resolved to take: this was too important. Better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission, and he would beg her later, should he earn the chance to.

And so, “Ir abelas, vhenan,” he whispered aloud as he walked before a row of dark and shattered eluvians. Stopping only once he came to one that stood apart from the others, wrapped with a particularly ornate frame. Familiar, with it’s curls of gold, though the decor was now tarnished and dark. The glass cloudy, but unbroken.

Only recently had Solas regained control of this section of the eluvians from Briala, relinquishing it from her possession during the Inquisition’s last foray to the Winter Palace where he acted as an agent of his own network in a tense — and private — negotiation. Ultimately, he won his prize, and was relieved to know her spies had not made good use of them prior.

Only the few left ajar, like unlocked doors, had been utilized in the time since the People walked freely along these paths. Most were long dark.

Others, like the one before him, still functioned but required a key — a phrase, act, or the touch of powerful magic — their use reserved only for those specific individuals who could wield it. Their make was always more extravagant: grand entrances created exclusively for the upper class. Doors never meant to open for just any traveller.

It had been an age since he’d needed the use of his once-high status to walk through one.

With a simple gesture, Solas sent a pulse of magic from his palm into the mirror’s surface. It set the glass ablaze, and with a crack of energy that echoed through the plane the eluvian roared to life. Absorbing and then bursting with a force it had not felt for thousands of years.

In a place this still, he could sense the way other mirrors reacted to this awakening. A shimmer upon their surfaces or a snap of electric tendrils reaching out for connection, yearning for a taste. Parched for the smallest drop of magic as they lay crumbling, lost to time.

A vision of a stone corridor came into focus — the other side of the path — lit only by the pale light of this realm shining in upon it. With this confirmation that both sides of the door were still in
tact, Solas stepped through.

He emerged in an old temple set deep in the uncharted forests of territory once held by his people. The air was musty and thin, and a puff of dust rose with his first step inside. Once the mirror closed behind him he was plunged into total darkness. A small blessing, as it meant no spell had activated upon his arrival — his presence had gone undetected.

He was well within the innermost chambers, he surmised, though the path ahead was unfamiliar. If he’d walked these halls once, it had been far too long since then for him to remember their layout. He had only the vague recollection of needing to head in a northeastern direction to reach another mirror.

Had he the luxury, he might have taken along a journal and mapped the structure. Spent hours, or even days, puzzling out its secrets.

But there was no time for curiosity.

He summoned a ball of fire to hold in his palm for light and headed down the hall. There was no danger here: any wards left behind by supplicants and caretakers had deteriorated long ago. If the holes and scratches in the stonework were any indication, animals had been making homes of the ruin for centuries. He passed more than one along the way: furry spiders lurking in corners and the startled squeak of rodents fleeing from the light. Their presence assured him of his safety as he traversed the ancient halls, though he was not foolish enough to let down his guard completely.

As he walked, he took note of the faded tapestries hung on the walls. Most had almost completely rotted away: what remained was little more than a few ragged scraps hanging on wooden stakes. Preserved by the still air in the depths of the chamber. A pity. The silvery threads from which they’d been crafted with were harvested from creatures long extinct, and the unique patterns of knots and colour used techniques no longer known to this world.

A moment was spared to stop and run his fingers along a ragged edge, marvelling at the feel of the weave and what memories it triggered. Then he pressed himself to move forward.

There was no time for nostalgia, either.

He located the next mirror with little difficulty, and to his relief found it still in tact. Two more followed, setting him along a path he walked with neither direction nor destination but was determined to follow all the same.

Hours passed.

The sun rose and crossed the sky. He quickly lost track of time: the journey had taken him in and out of the spaces between enough times that it was virtually impossible to tell the hour. Time and distance flowed strangely within the eluvians. The Elvhenan empire covered much of the world in his day, and many crossings were built to span its borders. He could cross the world in a matter of hours, should he find the right road to take, or spend months on a meandering path skirting vast forests and glittering lakes. It was a simple pleasure, once, to enjoy a twenty year walk. Paths like these were not made for mortals.

Precious time was lost to dead ends. Presumptions built by false memory and overconfidence. He’d travelled very little within the network since waking, and much of the world had changed around the crossings since their construction. It was an oversight he would clearly need to remedy.

Eventually, he managed to locate another space populated with a dozen unbroken mirrors all
leading to common areas; plazas and market squares once accessible to the Elvhen public. Many had lost their partner and so were useless to him. Those left would lead him to places untouched by modern scholars and adventurers.

Places full of lost knowledge.

One exited into a crumbling tower overlooking a small lake. The building was modest, but well-constructed — full of the remains of magical crafts and furniture. It was someone’s home and business, once. He tried sleeping there to see what spirits were drawn into the memories of a common man, but found nothing more than a few scattered wisps overseeing visions of a warm hearth.

In another, the Fade offered him the scene of a long road packed with vendors selling fresh fruit and baked treats, offering samples to passers-by. A temptation of pungent scents amplified by subtle magics. Clever acts of trickery and sleight of hand to lure in patrons, though there was no harm in the deception; it was part of the experience. Encouraged, if anything.

It wasn’t until he explored the dream of a public square that he caught upon the first hints of another presence.

At first, the scene was like any typical afternoon in a bustling city. People came and went, engaged in idle conversation, met with friends, acquaintances, and exchanged pleasantries. A few pairs purchased bustles of rich food or shiny trinkets and found grassy hills on which to share them together. It was a comforting view, and Solas stayed within it for some time as a reprieve from his journey. Flitting in and out of the scene so he might walk among its people as though he belonged.

He had almost resolved to leave when something odd caught his ear. Or, more accurately, the lack of something.

In the time he’d spent observing, he’d not witnessed a single disagreement. Not one ornery customer haggled over price; no misunderstandings, nor even a lover’s quarrel. It seemed unusual, given the setting and populace, that all the interactions here would be positive ones.

Of course, dreams were shaped by the dreamers themselves and so were not always accurate... but there was a certain unease that came with taking notice of this imbalance. A skipped note in a sonata that only a trained ear might find. And as the Fade was wont to do, once that anomaly caught his eye, more followed.

There were no beggars here, no plain clothing, no refuse or broken things. Each market stall was finely craft and kept in perfect shape. When he ran a finger along the raised edge of a fruit cart not a single splinter caught his skin. Patrons and sellers alike were dressed in rich fabrics dyed with bright colours, making it impossible to tell their class and station. Children were quiet, well-behaved, and stayed by their mothers’ sides; walking in step and never reaching for what they shouldn’t. Passers-by smiled too often and laughed too loud.

The attention to perfection was unusual. This memory was an eerily idyllic version of an ordinary day; viewed through the lens of fond nostalgia.

And try though he might Solas could not pierce beyond the honeyed lie that veiled this scene. It wasn’t so much that the memory felt fabricated as much as it seemed that pieces were missing entirely. It left the dreaming to re-write itself around the gaps, creating a likeness of the original that could easily fool a casual observer but did not stand up to closer scrutiny. This was not a trait he’d encountered in a memory before; and that ignorance left him unsettled.
Something had interfered here — pulled at loose threads and sewn the Fade back together.

Nothing about the scene felt inherently foreboding. If anything, it was clear that whatever was responsible had worked to preserve it in an ideal, if inaccurate, state. While the ultimate goal of the meddling remained a mystery, one thing was certain: it was purposeful. An act only a powerful spirit was capable of.

It was the first sign of Knowledge, or some spirit like it, that he’d encountered since he set out… and more than enough motive to dig deeper.

Eons of experience navigating the Fade had gifted him the patience and insight to narrow his focus. To look for the parts of the tapestry where the edges had been stitched, and the pattern didn’t match. A signature left by the work of an imperfect hand.

Soon, he found snags. A gentle tug at them created rifts.

And then voids.

In reaching for them he sensed the faint impression of something ancient, beyond. His fingers, pushed into the hollow of memory, brushed against the remnant left behind and he sensed a vast and quiet power.

*Old.*

As old as he, perhaps.

It compelled him.

More than simply curiosity; he was drawn to the presence of something almost familial. A distant connection from a time long passed. This entity could have the answers he so dearly sought. If nothing else, promised a kin like that he’d lost when his last friend died.

The power resonated with his own in a way he had not felt since his last time visiting Wisdom in their domain. There was a comforting harmony in the way two beings of a common origin touched upon each other in the Fade; an emptiness filled. And though he had only this fingerprint it left behind when it passed through, it would gift him a proper trail to follow. A starting point.

With a thrilling leap of his heart he reached for it.

If he was fortunate, the spirit may even have enough awareness to feel his presence searching, and reach out to him in turn. He could only hope against the possibility that the passing of thousands of years had resulted in its loss.

But before he could spare more than a moment to attune himself, something cold wrapped round his wrist.

Then, with a strength that far outmatched his own, it *pulled.*

In an instant he was torn through the gauzy plaza memory and into a void of the Fade beyond it. The whole of the dreaming was pulled out from beneath his feet. Its colourful scene and happy denizens blown away like so much smoke.

He was left floating, instead of falling, disoriented and horizontal with his grasped arm held out before him. Fingers outstretched toward a destination unknown. Though he could see no hand upon his body, the grip was real, and firm. He could not break it if he wished to — whatever had him
was intent to take him somewhere and he was helpless to resist.

He chose not to try.

While the surprise was unsettling, surely, the change in locale was hardly a threat in and of itself. If the spirit wished to do him harm, it would have: he was caught off-guard, overpowered, and did not attempt to defend himself — easy prey. This was not an aggressive act, but an invitation.

The method might leave something to be desired, but he could hardly fault the peculiar manners of ancient things.

Transit lasted only a moment, and the new setting was far from the malleable and familiar Dreaming he’d come from. Bare feet touched down upon a rough stone path that disappeared into the mouth of a tunnel built of charred bricks. The inside was dark and time-worn; walls wreathed in the gnarled roots of long-dead trees that pushed through gaps in the mortar and twisted back upon themselves. Moisture seeped through the cracks they left, pooling on the ground in dark puddles that made Solas think of demon’s blood on the field after a battle.

The air was stale; it smelled of empty temples and rot.

*This is old.*

On a whim, he pressed his palm against the wall at his right and pushed into it a pulse of energy. A simple but effective test: a developing lair would bend to the influence of older magic.

He felt only cold stone.

*Very old.*

“What a curious thing. It’s been so long since someone like you has ventured here,” came a voice. It was everywhere at once: at his ear and in the distance, emerging from the tunnel and echoing off the walls. “What do you seek?”

It spoke in Common, smooth and mild as honeyed milk. Alluring like Desire. Creeping like a spider on his neck.

“I seek Knowledge,” Solas answered in the tongue which he was questioned.

The voice paused to consider the answer, then offered, “How fortunate: you have found it.” A careful reply: he did not miss the more subtle implications of its evasiveness. Spirits did not lie, but could manipulate. He was being baited. “What is your intention?”

*This…*

This didn’t feel right.

Knowledge quested. Knowledge opened. Knowledge was impartial and inquisitive. It gave what it had freely, without reservation or judgement.

This felt *greedy.*

But there was no point in subterfuge; it would not only see through the attempt, but might also take offence. He had no desire to quarrel with his oldest kin, and so he provided. “I have been searching some time. I have questions I wish to find answers to, if possible.”
“Curious,” it said again.

Once, he’d told Ellana that the temptations of spirits were no worse than ripened fruit on the vine. The option to let it be was always there, no matter how sweet a taste it promised. One had to choose to enter the trap to have it sprung upon them.

The voice that spoke now was less like fruit, and more like a cup of water offered to a dying man.

“What do you know what is said of curiosity and cats?”

It enticed.

It was also his best option. There was no way left but forward.

“It is a good thing, then, that I am not a cat,” Solas replied evenly, and entered the tunnel.

A moment was spared to wonder if he should change his appearance, be it for respect or reverence. The vision of himself he’d created in the Fade was clad in the same simple traveling clothes his body currently slept in, in a copse of trees somewhere in a quiet forest. Surrounded by wards and bowls of food set out for curious creatures.

But the moment his feet touched the tunnel floor, a light appeared ahead, and the thought seemed unimportant.

It flickered. Distant, like a candle in a window. As he walked it picked highlights out of the brickwork. Gold stones worked into the pattern. Each one found revealed another up ahead, leading him along the path to Knowledge like a trail of breadcrumbs. A necessary guide, as the deeper he ventured the more difficult it became to navigate.

Veils of blackened moss hung from the ceiling like spiders’ webs, shrouding each bend and curve ahead. In a matter of moments he’d lost his sense of direction. The tunnel was smaller now than where he entered, and though he could not be certain how much progress he’d truly made through it, he sensed there was not far left to go — this was not an endless labyrinth, but an ingress.

Looking back, he saw there was no way behind him to retreat to. Only swirling fog left in his wake. He was being guided. Or pulled. Like a puppet on strings.

The master spoke: “What is your name, Elvhen?”

“Solas,” he replied.

A presence insisted at the back of his mind. Crawling fingers sifting through the knowledge and memories he’d left unguarded. Far more intent than Cole’s gentle brush over the surface in search of pain to heal.

Briefly, he considered allowing it unfettered access as a show of trust. Earn its favour. But — naive — he cautioned himself, and raised a mental barrier instead.

A moment too late, it seemed.

In Elvish, “Your other name?” the spirit probed.

There was power in a name so old it had become myth. Influence in titles gifted in respect, or uttered in fear. And though he felt compelled to give it all it asked of him there was a distant part of his mind which begged caution against revealing those secrets he held most dear.
Do not give it what it wants, trade only what is necessary.

Instead he offered it an answer as carefully crafted as its own had been. In a lilt of Elvish, with emphasis on the archaic accent he still carried. “I suspect you know it already, or you would not have asked.”

It switched back to Common to reply. “Clever.”

There was a short pause for thought before it spoke again. This time in a language which Solas did not know. That was rare. The words came out a string of hard consonants and lisping vowels, delivered in a throaty brogue that sounded just familiar enough to tell him he’d heard it in passing, but not had the opportunity to learn. The rhythm reminded him of Varric’s chuckle when he teased.

“Dwarvish?” he guessed. They were the only race he’d had no contact with in the Dreaming, and minimal since waking. The spirit gave no reply. “I am sorry, my friend, I do not yet know their tongue.”

“Kadan? A katari?” they replied. Qunlat this time: friend or foe. It was testing him. Looking for the gaps in his knowledge that might give it a better picture of his motive, or ability.

“Kadan,” Solas affirmed, and ducked to avoid a twist of withered root that hung, thick, from the ceiling. Beyond it, he found the source of the light he’d followed through the chamber.

The tunnel opened into a great, round, room not unlike Skyhold’s rotunda. Simply furnished, though it hardly offered the same pleasant ambiance: instead of a bright, open atrium this chamber was dark and cramped. The rear half lined with wooden shelves that stood in staggered rows. Stretching wide and tall until they disappeared into a vaulted ceiling so high it could have continued on into infinity. Burning torch sconces dotted the walls, their light too low to chase the darkness from its corners. Long shadows cast on the floor stretched from end to end, with strange shapes playing in the flickers.

The shelves were all closed in heavy iron bars. A vast collection of books, scrolls, curios and vials lay behind. Trapped like prisoners in cells no key could open — for there were no locks nor hinges to suggest a way in.

The books had no covers or runes on their spine and the bottles were made of darkened glass without labels, hiding their contents. Mysteries put on display not for consumption, but for pride.

A glittering hoard of secrets.

In the centre of it all stood the spirit warden. It had taken on the form of great owl in black plumage, and wore a blank, porcelain mask. More like a doll’s face than the costumes of Orlais. It was easily twice Solas’ own height, and its broad chest — turned to bid him welcome when as he entered — gave it an intimidating presence. One he felt more keenly for each step it took in his direction.

But when it came near enough to greet him properly, he was oddly soothed by its aura.

Comforted.

The full weight of temptation settled over him like a warm cloak. A lure that begged him yield to the power here. It pulled at his heart in a way that rivalled the love of Wisdom, and offered a far larger reward in return for his loyalty.

It would take more than just his wit to leave untouched. Beyond the risk of possession was a powerful desire to simply remain: to join with, submit to, or otherwise become a part of this place.

It would be… right.

He had to consciously will himself to resist the geas, but like the call of the void it remained in his periphery, never so far as to be forgotten. Once he’d shaken free of the draw and saw the snare for what it was it sent a frisson of fear crawling up his neck.

This was not the den of a being of intrigue and wonder. These shelves held no lore for perusal. No art or history was on display. No invitation extended by the presence of overstuffed furniture or tempting fireside.

No part of this realm possessed a shred of the comfort and intimacy that was ever-present in Wisdom’s home.

This place is wrong, he thought. This cannot possibly be the lair of Knowledge. Something darker lurks here now.

“Welcome, falon,” it said.

The spirit brought its masked face down to his height, regarding him with empty eyes that surely would have held unabashed interest, could he see them. But beyond the holes in the mask was nothing but swirling darkness. A void that begged him to stand and stare; lose himself in the allure of the mystery.

He shook it off.

Steeling himself, he cast his eyes to the locked shelves instead. Their contents shrouded by just enough mystery to ensure he could not properly discern their nature, but not so much that he’d be left unaware they were there at all. An important detail: ‘Knowledge’ was proud of the collection. It desired approval, or at the very least recognition.

“The square I visited earlier, the memories there,” Solas inquired carefully, “That was your doing?” He knew the answer already, but was curious how it might frame its reply.

It swelled with something like pride. Chest puffed out, and wisps of black smoke rising from the spaces between its comfortably ruffled feathers. A voice, strong and loud, echoed through the room like quiet thunder. Reverberating off the walls and playing amid the shelves. “What was worth recalling, I left. I took only what was already forgotten.”

Knowledge does not omit; it preserves.

There was an opportunity there to test a theory. “To re-write history does not lend itself to the truth,” challenged Solas. “You cannot tell a story with half the pages missing. If Knowledge is truly devoted to the preservation of history, why allow the scene to become warped by the biases of those who choose to remember it best?”

The spirit’s reply was immediate. Practiced. Its voice seemed to come from all around; everywhere but the body before him. “Memory is imperfect. Mortals work to forget what is painful until no one is alive to recall it at all. What is left behind becomes the truth.” He had his answer: it did not challenge the presumption that Knowledge was no longer it’s true form. Moreover, it was aware of — even pleased with — this change. It did not try to hide it. “Why should they hold onto what pains them? What good does it do those who do remember to suffer for it needlessly?”
It moved so suddenly he did not notice until it had already disappeared from his view. Curled talons made no sound on the stonework as it sped across. Gliding — silent — just above the surface; no hint of its direction. It appeared behind him, settling on the stale air like a quiet sigh. Mask cocked just over his shoulder and tilted to one side in emphasis.

*A challenge?* It wanted his reply. Perhaps some part of it that quested yet remained.

“To suffer teaches strength, and humility. We cannot learn from our successes, only failures.”

“And what does a fight in a public square teach?” It replied, and its tone dropped to a low rumble. A warning not to argue. It wanted his *agreement.* “A bitter man’s jealousy over another’s earnings, or a woman’s guilty conscience when her eyes strayed from her lover?”

Solas considered. Cautious. Weighing what it clearly expected from his answer against his instinct to debate. Knowledge had become prideful, and impatient. *Selfish.* It wanted, more than anything, to be praised.

This place reeked of its arrogance.

He should not linger here.

“It is not my place to say what lessons were learned by those who lived it, only that their experiences in memory deserve to remain unchanged.”

There came a soft huff, like a quiet laugh, but it gave no reply sure enough to inform him if it approved of his answer.

A different tactic: the mask lowered, independent from the rest of its anatomy, until it hung before him at eye level. Wings tucked demurely behind its back. It imitated the body language of a respectful peer viewing him as an equal, but its voice held only contempt. “Knowledge,” it seethed, in mocking Elvhen. “*Memory, unchanged.* What good is an age of it in the hands of mortals who would only take from the bounty what made them most powerful? Then reshape it for abuse and dominion?”

Its great, feathered, body began to warp and shrink — swirls of black smoke coalescing behind the porcelain face — until it had remade itself into a creature roughly Solas’ own height and shape. A sharp jerk of its head to one side revealed a pointed Elven ear.

The voice spoke from within the mask now. “*You know of what I speak.*”

The point flattened into the soft curve of a Human ear, and a single arm was thrust out toward him. In it appeared the shadow of a bejewelled staff topped with an orb, not unlike those favoured by the Magisters of old Tevinter.

The message was clear: an aggressor, welding an artifact stolen from the wreckage of his people’s fallen empire, used it to subjugate the last survivors.

The spirit rapped the butt of the staff twice upon the floor, like a gavel swung in judgement, and the sound echoed through the room. Loud enough that his ears twitched, hands flexing at his side as he fought the urge to cover them.

All the while the mask faced forward, intent and expressionless. “Knowledge was not shared, but stolen,” it accused. “Changed to benefit new masters. I have watched it hoarded and brewed into a poison that destroyed nations for thousands of years.”
“But… if you take away its darkest parts—” The orb on the top of the staff disappeared, leaving the weapon a useless rod in the hands of its owner. A second later it, too, disintegrated — and an empty human hand turned, palm up, as though in apology. “—you spare those who would have suffered the consequence of its misuse.” The human form swelled and shifted, briefly, before settling back on an Elvhen body. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

It was startling to realize, in that moment, just how much he did.

If his people had left behind a less complete legacy, what difference might it had made to the last survivors of Elvhenan? If their most powerful artifacts and knowledge were never used as chains to bind them?

What would it have meant to his surviving kin to have never had to see what thousands of years of prejudice and conquest wrought?

What of the Exalted March? The Dales? Alienages?

For a fraction of a second, he saw a pair of lights flicker behind the spirit’s mask. Eyes — red, ravenous, and greedy — focused their sight upon the seeds of understanding it had planted in him… an unspoken accord that bridged across their shared disdain. What had become of — what was left of — modern Elves.

That awareness was just enough to snap him out of it.

Dangerous.

Do not tarry here.

He swallowed, hard, past the knot in his throat. Voice tight. “My views on history are irrelevant to my purpose here. I want—”

“I know what you want.” It cut him off with a wave of something like a hand, then once more reshaped itself. Wide, sloping shoulders grew wider still as its body grew taller. Hands to wings, and form to feather, until it had shifted back into its original shape of a giant owl.

Through each transition the mask remained a lone constant. Detached and floating over the ichorous cloud of energy that was its changing body. It wore an unsettling expression of neutrality: blank eyes fixed forward, unblinking on pale skin with features too vague to pin down as Dwarf, Human, Elf, Qunari… or even some amalgamation of them all. The mask moved fluidly, like smoke on still air, while the rest of the spirit’s body jerked and twitched like the animal from which it took its inspiration.

“You are here for a mate you’ve sickened.” It was a cruel, almost mocking way to frame his circumstance. “Your kind are so few, now; their lives almost forgotten. So much misery after the Veil.”

An attempt to bait him, now — and an obvious one at that. Responding with anger or offence would only give it more power; he was in its home. It was enjoying his company.

Solas pressed forward. “There have been others. Couples made of Elf and Elvhen who produced children… I was unable to find the memories of their experiences, and of how their mortal partners persevered. Have you taken them, like those you took from the market?”

“To what end would you seek the memories of their pain, if not to prolong your own?” it countered. As if the answer to this quandary were so simple: walk away now, lest it all be made
much worse. “Why dally as you do? Mortal lives are so fragile, and fleeting. You will grieve, as they did when their mates expired.”

He bristled. “As do all things, be they immortal or not. The inevitability of suffering is hardly reason to bid one experience more when knowledge exists that might ease it.”

“You say, yet keep so much to yourself. Your pride protects you. Protects them.” It swooped low and closed the distance between them, until the mask became a mirror in which Solas could see his own image reflected back. Its next words were uncomfortably close, whispered in his ear like the sweetest poison. “You wear your secrets so close they have become your face.”

It used his own voice to taunt him with words he once spoke aloud: “We are not so far apart, you and I.”

There was a rush of black, and suddenly it had returned to its post near the centre of the room. Looming over him like a shadow. He could feel its impatience with him growing; it wanted allegiance and he’d given it a debate.

Dangerous, he reminded himself.

But he needed…

“Do you know what happened to your kin? Those who partook in mortal affairs and brought forth children from their unions?”

“I imagine they lived well with their families, while they could. Then grieved, as you said.”

“Terribly,” the spirit affirmed, pouring so much power into the word that it was as cruel to hear as any blade was felt. “When their mates bore their children the mages survived best. Of those without magical affinity, most perished. Rituals saved but a few. In the end, they still watched all they loved wither, and were left with naught but fleeting memories doomed to fade with time. Pain.” Darkness impressed upon the edges of the room, creeping like a sickness, until it had surrounded them both in a steadily shrinking circle. Here, Solas lacked the power to push it aside the way he did in the dream he’d created for Ellana, and so was forced to take a step toward the spirit so not to be lost in it. “Some chose death, or endless dreams, rather than live with the loss. A precious few found Knowledge. Asked me to keep what they could not.”

Again its form shifted, settling on the body of a tall elf on their knees. Helpless. Begging.

It continued, “I took their memory; I made their unions taboo. What I left was but a taste of what they’d felt, and it stood as a warning for others to not to suffer the same fate. To stay far from the affairs of mortals.”

It took pride in the revelation of its own perversion. Of the will it had stolen, unwitting, from so many of his kin. This, more than anything else it had taunted him with so far, hit its mark. Sent his heart careening into his throat.

Things were so much easier in the Fade — both to feel, and to falter.

“You took only their freedom to choose,” Solas snapped, his voice now sharp with ire. “What of those who persisted? If you took it all, including those memories of the ones who lived through strength or action, then those others were denied that which might have saved them unnecessary grief.”

“For each foolish enough to persist, hundreds were spared by the truth I created.”
“A lie.”

“Only by omission,” the spirit teased, its great chest swelling once more. “I peddled no falsehoods. Their pain was less a burden with those memories gone; I did only what was asked. What was needed to ensure an end to their suffering, and discourage those who would suffer in the future, needlessly. Only pain and death exists on this path: if you pursue it you will watch all you love sicken and die under the blanket of the Veil. Your mate, and any children she survives to bear. What, truly, would you earn? Her death is inevitable. What difference does it make to delay it by a day or twenty years?”

It had found a thread of fear and uncertainty. One he guarded in the deepest parts of himself: away from Ellana, away from Cole, away from the Nightmare when he was in its realm.

But here, he could feel some part of him unraveling.

Persevere.

“I know that many non-mages died, but others—”

“Others who survived suffered greatly for it,” the spirit interrupted, cutting across his protest.

He persisted. “—But some did survive; those without affinity were given a chance by the actions of their partner.” The question hung in the air unasked, if only not to reveal his growing desperation for the answer.

How?

The spirit spared not even a moment of consideration before reacting. Both wings raised and stretched high above its head, crossing the room in long, powerful, strides until it stood mere inches away. “Only to suffer later. Beings as yourself do not need to weigh themselves with such things. Knowledge brought no peace to them, and neither will it to you.”

“If we are truly not so different, then allow me the opportunity to do with those memories what I will!” he plead, and felt his knees grow weak. His voice rang, broken, through the cavernous room like a shattered bell, and down his walls went with it.

A moment too late he realized his mistake… only when his next breath drew out of the air a ghostly hand with fingers outstretched that disappeared into his open mouth.

The demon saw its opportunity; reached, and then grasped.

The consequences of his negligence were immediate and terrible: a familiar scene was drawn from his own memory, formed by the Fade around him. He saw himself on Ellana’s balcony in the moonlight, seated in a chair he’d pulled from her room. Leaving her asleep in the bed where they’d laid together, for the first time — it would have to be the only time — agonizing over the desire stay over the need to leave.

His thoughts were a torrent of regret and desire. Self-loathing and recklessness.

What came after changed the course of his life: she woke alone, and far sooner than he’d anticipated. Before he had the chance to slip away. She confronted him, and he’d told her all he could — more than he should have. The soft touch of her hand upon his back guided him to a night of confessions he never intended to make. Had decided not to make. Yet somehow, against all odds, she’d neither run nor turned him over to a guard. Instead, she embraced him.
In the perversion of this memory, that which the spirit had recreated for him, he saw himself take the opportunity he was not awarded.

Rise from the chair, grab his discarded shirt and belt from where they lay on the floor next to the bed…

And leave.

She’d be none the wiser; asleep, and content to believe he’d stayed the night by her side. Tucked against his body and sharing in their warmth, sated and beloved.

She’d be furious come morning. Broken-hearted, but safer in the long run. Her love would warm the heart of another, more deserving, and better suited to spend a life with her.

The vision melted away with a wave of the owl’s wing. “Would it not have been better this way?” it cajoled.

Careless, Solas admonished. It already had so much more of him than he’d intended to give. It had found a kinship in his secrets and his fears and that bond was more dangerous than any demon’s lure.

Once more he tried to separate himself — to raise a barrier powerful enough to keep it from taking any more — but found he couldn’t. There was an unmistakable presence in the back of his mind, now. It had a hold of doubts he’d kept carefully secreted away, found a loose thread to pull from the web he’d woven of truth and lies.

It continued. Taunting. “There is wisdom in deception, even beyond self-preservation. What fruit will your truth bear in time, now that you’ve chosen to burden others with it?”

Another vision took shape before him. In it, he saw Ellana dressed in a thin robe; her body swollen and heavy with child. Close to the end, but she was left sick and small for the effort.

Skin too tight, too thin, too pale.

She cradled her belly, staring down at herself with sunken eyes and sharp cheekbones turned grey with a deathly pallor. Gone was the pleasant curves of her muscled arms and full jaw. All that was left was pock-marked skin and wrist bones that protruded at odd angles.

The ghost of his lover looked up and met his eyes, briefly, before melting into the ether.

“Think of all you’d have spared her, had you considered the value of Omission? Is this the future you desire for her?”

No. Never.

“Yes,” he lied. He confessed. In selfishness and desperation. He would not lose her; he would not lose them. She would not suffer a day more for silence and secrets. That would not be her fate. It would be better. Different.

She was different.

“You are willing to bind her with the weight of all your truths and damn them both to a life of danger solely so you would not spend those years alone?”

He felt, more than saw, the prediction it gave him in a false memory:
A baby, born in violence and in fear, hidden from those who might wish it harm.

Long pointed ears and small fingers.

A powerful scream gifted by a first breath. A hand that cupped its mouth to quiet any further cries. A hand — *his hand* — to hide it away.


A powerful message, as a hostage — more powerful as a corpse.

Fire erupts, and a scream rises from their mouth: high and terrified. A horrible sound.

A flash of blackened flesh and a wound that spreads across its sides and chest as it is consumed.

He flinched away from the sight, then reached for it in guilty apology. Desperate to intervene, and save the vision from the trappings of his own nightmare… only to watch it succumb. His stomach turned.

*No!*

But, “Yes,” he choked.

*This will never come to pass. It cannot. I would never*—

“Then know what your kin wished banished from history and see what good it gifts you.”

A tucked wing was brandished like a knife. The movement so quick he had no chance to see it coming. The mass of feathers thrust toward him tapered into a single pointed finger, pressed into the centre of his forehead.

Memory hit him like a storm.

A cacophony, funnelled into his mind in the space of a single breath.

Places, times, loves, losses, *names. So many names.* He could not possibly learn them all, though he longed for the opportunity to cherish each one and hold it dear. The way their lovers had. Ensure that they lived on somewhere in the world that had forgotten them.

A dozen of mortal lives ended, swollen with child and sick to death while their lovers prayed for mercy from a pantheon of Gods who never heeded their calls. Fragile bodies, weak and weary, grew thin from the strain; a punishment worthy of Falon’din’s judgement for the common crime of loving and lying with a race of ancients.

A dozen mortal lives continued, brought to kneel but not conquered by the task of bringing forth a new life made in love. Sweat and blood clung to pallid skin as mouths opened to let forth screams of pain and triumph. Ringing in the silence of bedrooms, tents, caves and forest clearings… followed by the mewling cry of newborn babes, eager for the comfort of their mother’s breast.

He saw a hundred Elvhen bury bodies of their mates and children.

He saw a hundred more surrounded by generations seeded from a single union.

Amid them were a precious few non-mages who carried on with the help of their immortal partner. What was done took on different connotations for each pair, though the result was the same.

A sudden burst of power, shared or given, to awaken a hidden nature.

A gift, to give the strength to carry on. Be it grant them merely a year more, or twenty.

Solas woke with a gasp in the lonely clearing he’d settled in. The last light of the setting sun disappearing beyond the Western edge of the old forest. His chest ached as though he’d been drowning, suffocating, and only just breached the surface of dangerous waters for breath. And the spirit’s haunting words rang in his ears like a warning.

_We are not so far apart, you and I._

* 

It was night when he returned to Skyhold. The quiet hours, when the typically paired guard shifts were down to singles for an hour or two, and the fortress much easier to navigate unseen. A year of routine shifts at their posts had made soldiers careless when the populace slept. This time was by far the safest for sneaking about.

The isolation of the mountains was deceptive. It offered a certain sense of security: a castle nestled deep in the snow-capped peaks of the Frostbacks was well protected by the rock and ice. Travellers to the area had spent days or weeks on the road with this specific destination in mind, and all worked their way up the same cold roads, entering through the same main gate. Nothing arrived here that did not mean to, and it was scouted well before it reached the bridge. It was far less likely for Skyhold to be unexpectedly attacked than a village closer to the main trade routes. And so the soldiers posted on the walls followed the same routine each night as they did the hundred previous, and grew bored.

Those on guard at this hour had become too quick to allow each other the reprieve of a short walk, a book, or spiced bread stolen from the unwatched larder. Never gone so long as to risk arousing suspicion, but long enough for a knowledgable individual to bypass the remaining guards undetected.

On any other night the lapse in security was a constant source of concern, but tonight it was a blessing: it worked in Solas’ favour. For once he was grateful. Both for their carelessness, and for the borrowed, beaten copy of Sword and Shields that lived on the second floor of the rotunda. The young Ferelden man in polished plate stationed in the great hall was far too deeply absorbed in the latest chapter to notice Solas sneaking into the Inquisitor’s tower room.

Another time, he might have allowed a door to slam shut. Made a memorable statement of their carelessness.

But punishing oversight was not important this evening, so he let it slide.

Ellana’s room was silent when he entered. Her breath almost too quiet to hear in the cavernous space, even to his ears. She was deeply asleep. He made a point to close and latch the balcony doors, then draw the curtains closed, before he found her. Just in case.

He passed Cole on the desk as he crossed from one set of doors to the next. “She was waiting for you, but was too tired to stay awake,” he said.
“I am glad to see you kept her company,” Solas replied in a whisper. “How is she?”

“Tired,” he answered, and their eyes met as he raised his chin beneath the cover of his floppy hat. “Angry.”

It couldn’t be helped, Solas thought.

“Thank you,” he said.

Cole nodded, then appeared at his side a second later. A cold hand touched Solas’ wrist; gentle, but insistent. Begging him caution. “She would not be happy if you hurt yourself to help her,” he warned.

With a sigh, “I know,” Solas replied.

The spirit disappeared, and he was left alone.

He steeled himself with a breath, and approached the bed. Ellana lay asleep on her side, curled around a pillow with the covers pulled up to her chest. Her nightclothes had fallen from one shoulder, leaving it bare. It was cold when he lay a hand upon it, and shook her gently.

“Ellana,” he urged. She did not stir; too exhausted by ongoing sickness to sleep as lightly as she once had. “Ellana,” he repeated. “Vhenan, wake up.”

That seemed to reach her. He watched, anxious, as her eyelids began to flutter and she shifted beneath his touch. The room was dark, with the sole exception of the streams of moonlight that cut through the gaps in the curtains, but Elven eyes saw well enough in a low-lit space. He needn’t light a candle for her.

Once she’d blinked herself awake, and focused on his face, she looked more confused than anything. Brows knit in an odd mix of question and concern. Eyes darting rapidly between his.

He smiled, warm, to reassure her.

An expression wiped immediately from his face when she slapped him hard with an open palm. The force — and surprise — of it enough to turn his head and draw a cry of alarm that rang through the room as loud as the strike itself.

“You self-righteous, arrogant, selfish, horrible, ancient, bastard!” she seethed. Each new epithet spit louder and angrier than the one previous. It was followed by an equally furious string of Elvish that left him rather inappropriately impressed with her creative usage of a vocabulary she’d only very recently expanded. “It’s been two fucking days!”

With both hands she shoved hard at his shoulders. Still left reeling from the strike, it was almost enough to knock him off the bed completely. He had to grab hold of the bedside table as anchor to save himself the pain of falling backward onto the floor.

“Do you just think you can sneak away from Skyhold without even speaking with me about your intentions? About your plans? After everything! After all of this?! You swore to me no more secrets, you fucking asshole! You didn’t tell a soul where you’d be — you just disappeared! I didn’t even know you were gone until Cole told me!”

He frowned. “Cole told you?”
The interruption went unnoticed. She was on fire, and her words burned as much as the welt rising on his cheek. “Do you know how terrible it would have been if, when Josephine asked about you the next morning, I hadn’t even known you’d left and had gone searching for you? I had to make up a story about you being ill for two days that I’m not sure she even believed!”

“Ellana,” Solas cut in.

“You know how many times you’ve actually been ill since we’ve met? Because I don’t think it’s any!”

“Ellana, please.”

“How dare you! How dare you do that to me, you unbelievable fucking—” Fists came up, either to strike or shove him again, teeth grit and eyes wide, and for a moment he thought to stand and take it. But when the moonlight caught a glint of unshed tears in her eyes, his heart clenched.

He caught both her wrists before she could push him again. Lowered them, gently. “I know, I know. I’m so sorry,” he soothed, his voice barely a whisper to her furious shout.

The tears were on her cheeks now, curling under her jaw, and though her lip quivered with the effort of holding them back her eyes remained hard. Mouth defiantly twisted into a downward sneer. “How was I even supposed to know you’d return?” she accused, and her breath caught on a sob.

It was horrible, how sincere the question was. How fearful her voice. As though she could honestly believe he’d walk away from her now. After everything.

“I would never—”

But now that she’d begun she found it hard to stop, and everything came pouring out. “It has been ages since you’ve shared a bed with me, Solas. Even just to sleep. You retire early to your room each night and spend the rest of the time working. I have barely even seen you. What few opportunities I’ve had to invite your company have been met with excuses or requests that I take the time to rest, instead. For weeks! And then you disappear! What else would I think?” It all came out a rush that left her breathless by the end. Chest heaving from exertion. He could see the sheen of perspiration forming at her temples, betraying how exhausted she was already, if only just from the expression of her own rage.

“I didn’t—” he began, and stopped. A lie. Too easy to tell himself. He did know. He’d be a fool if he truly believed she had not noticed how much he’d kept to himself over the last few weeks spent chasing answers. He’d had a dozen opportunities to speak with her, but missed them all to spare her the weight of his own worries.

It was in her best interest, he’d decided for her — it would only cause more pain.

He would tell her only what she needed to know, and not a word more.

And what prize had his secrets wrought?

She wore her anger openly upon her face now. An ire near to hatred, awash with a mix of relief, confusion, and betrayal. She was furious, and righteous.

What else could she think?

The pain in his voice was just as open. “I’m so sorry.” Carefully, he lay a hand upon her shoulder.
Telegraphing his movements so she might have an opportunity to push him away, should she need to. Rebuke any advances and curse him again. But when his lips touched her tear-stained cheek and pressed a kiss there, she could only loose a wretched sob instead. “It was never my intention to make you worry. You deserve your anger: it was wrong to leave without word. I felt I had little time. You can yell all you like in the morning, and I will tell you all you ask of me, but for now I would ask that you trust me and lie back. You are already exhausted, and I am unsure if this will make it better or worse in the immediate aftermath.”

There was a desperation in his voice she’d not heard from him before, and it gave her pause. Stilled her hands against his grip. She lay her body back upon the prop of pillows, and allowed him to arrange himself to sit more comfortably next to her. His forehead rest against hers, and with both hands cradling her cheeks she clearly felt both the shuddering breath he drew, and the way his fingers shook. Just a little.

“What is it you intend to do?” she asked. Not entirely unafraid.

When next his eyes opened, they were nothing but white light.

“What?”

She felt a great wave crash into her body. Like ocean waves in a vicious storm.

There was no pain… just sensation. So much at once that she had no ability to process it all.

She felt each thread in the sheet against her skin, every hair on her head, the whisper of her breath on the air, and a crackling power that existed in and upon everything around her.

Waiting, wanting, to be touched and manipulated.

And then she felt nothing.

Ellana woke to pounding.

Morning light spilled in through the gauzy curtains, bathing the room in a soft orange glow that stretched from her balcony to her bed. The dawn warmed her legs and stomach, exposed beneath the hem of her nightdress, bunched up around her chest. During the night she’d wriggled down the bed, atop the covers, bringing her clothes up with her. The small swell of her middle now only just visible to her, when bared.

She lay a hand over it, as she often did in the mornings, and took in a deep breath to test her constitution for the task of getting up for the day… then, strangely, found that the familiar wave of nausea didn’t follow. Normally just the act of being roused from sleep resulted in at least one bout of sickness.

A soft snore came from her right. Turning, she saw Solas asleep on the bed next to her. He lay on his stomach with a hand stretched out toward her. Still dressed in his traveling clothes, complete with thin leather shoes that had left scuffs on the duvet. He’d not even bothered to remove them before laying down.
That was curious.

It was unlike him to stay at all, there was far too much risk in it. They had an unspoken agreement on the rules of sharing her bed: he was always to return before sunrise — there were too many people in the halls come morning, and it was too easy to be witnessed leaving her rooms at times he had no good reason to be there.

She put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. No response. Another, harder shove made no difference either. Not a sigh or catch in his breath to show he’d even noticed her attempts to rouse him at all.

Very curious.

She decided to leave him be: deeply asleep, and clearly exhausted. Enough so that she went as far as to check if he was breathing regularly. Though she was loath to leave him in her bed, she trusted he would find his way back to his room without the slip being discovered somehow.

The sound came again: pounding. Followed by a muffled voice. “Your worship? Your worship! Are you alright?”

It was a handmaid, come to wake her. Normally they came right in and called out to her from the landing to ensure she did not sleep too long. They’d wait there for permission to approach with breakfast, tea, or messages to deliver — human inhibition to protect her modesty, in case she was not yet dressed. It was a familiar ritual, and one she’d come to trust. For whatever reason the girl had not even made it through the threshold this morning.

More banging. The door shifted in its frame, and with it came the sound of an iron bar rattling.

“I’m alright!” Ellana called out, and the noise immediately stopped. Slowly, she sat up. Rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “You locked the door?” she whispered down to Solas’ sleeping form.

Predictably, he gave no reply.

Louder, “I’m coming,” she added, and slipped from the bed. Rearranging her loose linen nightclothes to ensure they hid her figure. She passed a small key placed very deliberately upon the centre of her writing desk as she walked by, and took it.

When she unlocked the door she found one of the younger girls, Ana, standing on the other side with hand still raised to resume her banging. She was an excitable youth, human, who had come in from Redcliffe for work. Always polite, though rarely reserved; she was open with her gratitude over being employed by what she viewed as a truly prestigious organization. More specifically, the honour to serve as handmaid to its Elven leader.

The instant the door opened her worried expression melted into one of palpable relief, and Ellana was embraced by an all-encompassing, tight, hug.

Though the gesture was decidedly endearing, it made her immediately very aware of the girl’s body pressed flush against her middle. She took her by the waist in both hands and pushed her back; just a little, not so much to imply she’d been offended.

Ana quickly stepped back into the stairs. Shuffled her feet and ducked her head in apology. “I’m sorry, Inquisitor. I was just worried when you didn’t answer! You’ve never locked the door before. And you’ve been so ill,” she rambled, the Ferelden accent causing her words to string together close enough to make it hard to understand. “Are you alright? Are you well?”

“I’m fine,” Ellana replied, and it was mostly true. The queasiness was by far the most manageable
it had been in weeks. She came up with an excuse quickly. “I was busy, and I locked it last night to avoid any interruptions, then forgot about it.”

The girl nodded sagely, as though the lie was not painfully thin, and Ellana was grateful for the unique combination of hero-worship and naïveté that led her not to ask questions. She’d already moved on, eager for a chance to assist.

Carefully, “You’re looking less green today,” she commented. “Would you like to try some breakfast?”

No one was more surprised than she by the honesty of her reply: “Yes, actually. I think I would.”

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the jumps, but it didn't feel right to cut this anywhere but where I ended it. Thank you for your patience during the brief hiatus; I had a lot of personal projects I had to deal with before I could finish this chapter. I hope it was worth the wait. :-X
It ended up not being terribly difficult to sell the lie that Solas had been ill instead of absent.

He made it back to his quarters somewhere around late-morning. Barely. Pausing in the rotunda to catch his breath under the guise of gathering papers to take back with him for work. For once, being witnessed on the way turned out to be a boon: his lethargy and shock-white pallor lent significant credence to the story. As did Dorian’s exclamation of horror upon running into him as he passed through the library.

Once he made it to the safety of his own bed he didn’t leave it for another two days.

On the second evening, Ellana found a quiet hour to check in and found him sweat-slick and clutching a bucket. Miserable, but stable. When asked, he compared the experience to consuming magebane: a toxin suited for magic-users, favoured by bards and rogues. Often given quickly and quietly to drain them of their power — like an herbalist’s Smite — leaving them all but useless on the battlefield.

All things considered the description reminded Ellana more of a particularly nasty hangover over poison, but she chose not to share that observation.

Once he regained his strength he was true to his word: answering every question she posed to the best of his ability, including what limited understanding he had of the transference he’d performed.

“Magic was, and is, intrinsic to Elvhen life — both in sustaining and creating,” he’d explained. “The affinity lies within you, as all elves, but is dormant in non-mages; I’ve offered a transfusion, of sorts, that might ease the process for some time. It will sustain you through this experience, as you lack the ability to sustain yourself. Though I am not sure for how long… or if I may need to repeat the process later. For now it appears to have made some impact on your strength.”

The experiment seemed a success, but left him exhausted. Drained completely of mana in the immediate aftermath and barely able to do more than sleep until it returned. If anything, it was a humbling experience to learn just how much he relied on the use of magic for the most mundane tasks. Even lighting candles or warming a bath. Fortunately he recovered quickly, and by the end of a week he was back to keeping a regular schedule with no permanent effects suffered from his “terrible fever”.

Ellana’s recovery, though it took a little longer, was far more dramatic. Her health stabilized rapidly.

The morning after Solas’ return was the first in ages that she didn’t spend heaving bile into a chamber pot. And while the nausea didn’t disappear entirely it did reduce to a level manageable enough for her to start reclaiming some of the hours she lost to it every day. There was no shortage of things to do. Delays, delegation or outright neglect over the many weeks she’d spent too ill to
work had amassed a stack of letters piled upon her desk as intimidating as the tap-tap-tap of Josephine’s impatient foot next to it.

It came as pleasant surprise that she made it through a considerable amount of the backlog in just the first few days. Hard at work, she split her afternoons between the war room, the library and the desk next to Josephine’s in the alcove outside the war room. Eventually carving out enough time to resume her reading and writing lessons. After almost a year of study, she’d nearly reached a point where she could read aloud without hesitating on every word with more than two syllables.

Cursive remained a sore point. So many loops.

It was fortunate that her advisors had handled so much in Ellana’s stead; what was left behind amounted to only a fraction of what she normally would’ve taken on. And, tedium be damned, she enjoyed doing it. Being ill awarded her little, but did give her the opportunity to realize just how much she missed the predictability of a typical working day. After so long spent cooped up — alone and miserable — she feared she’d nearly lost her mind. Having busywork was a joy.

By the fourth day her appetite returned with a vengeance. It might as well have been a lifetime since she’d had a chance to eat a proper meal. When she successfully kept down her first, the day following Solas’ return, it was such a joy she nearly cried.

Not much later it wasn’t just hunger, but proper cravings, that hit in full force. The first ones she’d experienced. Strange, insistent — and oddly exciting — it was the first real and measurable symptom of pregnancy she’d had beyond the sickness.

The most intense of them came upon her out of nowhere. One morning she woke up and all she could think about were apples. But not just any apples. Specifically the green ones that tasted just on the wrong side of bitter, and were only used for making pies and jams. The apples that weren’t for eating. Nobody actually went to the kitchen and asked to have them served with lunch. Not when there were a dozen better, sweeter, choices available. They were the kind of thing one only ate when they were desperate or starved and literally had no other option.

Except her, apparently.

Suddenly — inexplicably — she loved them.

She could eat them with every meal. As a meal. She dreamed about eating them by the armful.

Didn’t — because she was too concerned it might look conspicuous — but spent all day fantasizing about the idea.

When she mentioned the obsession to Solas he surprised her by bringing a small basket of them to her room that same evening so she might enjoy them privately. Ellana was so grateful for the gift that the happy tears she burst into upon receiving it was startling enough to make him worry he’d offended her instead.

Even beyond the apple cravings, she found it a challenge to pace herself when it came to food. Not just for the fact that she was absolutely famished all the time but also simply in celebration of having the ability to enjoy eating again.

What a miraculous thing: food. A meal. Multiple times a day, even! There were periods in her life where game was so scarce near her clan’s territory that she and her fellow hunters could barely kill enough chewy, old rabbit to feed them all for more than a day. Now she had virtually anything she wanted at her beck and call — bitter apples included — all she had to do was ask a runner to fetch
Never again would she take for granted the gift of hunger.

And from it, it did not take long to regain enough of what she’d lost to lend a healthy glow to her skin. Put the rose back into her cheeks.

Cause her pants to start bursting at the seams.

If she did not break the news herself, her too-tight jackets and unfastened breeches hidden beneath loose blouses would break it for her.

_Soon_, she said instead, and felt the weight of both Solas and Dorian’s disapproval. The two men were in rare agreement without ever exchanging a word on the topic.

The improvement in her diet helped with everything. Day-to-day fatigue was hardly cured, nor did she expect it to be, but her constitution returned to a level she’d imagine was more typical for a pregnant woman in otherwise good health rather than that of an elder dying of lung disease.

She became reacquainted with her regular walks and even resumed the morning exercises she’d been forced to abandon. Starting with combat forms and stretches to rebuild her core strength, and working her way up to hand-to-hand practice against hay-stuffed dummies in the soldiers’ yard. Training hard enough to break two practice bows and a wooden sword just in the first week back.

The sheer doggedness with which she approached the task could be described as excessive, but that was hardly true given how her fitness had suffered. She no longer felt entirely confident she could take down an attacker should she be charged with the task. At least not without outside assistance or a significant tactical advantage. It was a weakness that nagged at her _incessantly_. Riding on the paranoia over occupational hazards like would-be assassins or enemies at the walls. It didn’t matter how unlikely the scenario, _it could still happen_, and that left her far too wound up to pace herself.

What if Skyhold were attacked tomorrow and she no more useful than a squire? If she had to rely completely on the strength of others to protect her, rather than work together as a united team? What if she were seriously maimed or even killed by a _common bandit_?

It was, frankly, an embarrassing notion.

And more than sufficient motivation to ignore all of the advice she’d received to take it slow, and leap headlong into more strenuous training. It was necessary. The idea of even one more afternoon spent ‘resting’ in her room when she could be hard at work was positively insipid.

Once she’d decided that solo training had utterly failed to meet her expectations of a challenge, she began interrupting the rituals of others in attempt to persuade them to spar with her.

Iron Bull wouldn’t even entertain the conversation and walked away before she’d managed to get started. Not even taunting him would work. _The coward._

Cassandra and Blackwall, however, were more amenable.

While not terribly keen to engage her so soon into her recovery they did eventually agree to light martial training with wooden staves. However, it was immediately clear to her that they weren’t utilizing the full range of their abilities in these matches.

They stopped holding back once she’d knocked them on their backsides enough times to thoroughly wound their pride.
But after another week, even those sessions proved to no longer be enough to keep her satisfied. Her partners were still not bringing their full strength to the yard — she could absolutely tell — and the rush that came from a typical practice spar was nowhere near enough to quell the mountain of restless energy she’d accumulated.

No matter how hard she pushed herself, nothing worked to exhaust her completely.

She’d end the days sore, tired — often bruised — but still too far from drained to fall asleep easily.

When she was still terribly sick, those rare days she’d awakened feeling bright and eager were an unexpected gift… now they were a constant, daily source of uncomfortable need she never could quite slake. Like a child trapped in a small room, sustained by diet of sweets and ennui: she was climbing the walls.

Once fulfillment could no longer be found in training, and Leliana expressly forbade her to leave the castle walls looking for bears, she turned her attention toward a more intimate resolution.

After all, relief could come in many forms; and the tension had become unbearable.

However it was quickly apparent that tending to the task herself left her only frustrated and lonely for the trouble. Worse, once she’d given herself permission to fantasize it opened a floodgate: now she could think of little else. Every wandering thought between reading and training landed on the pout of Solas’ mouth when he leaned in to kiss her, the curve of his backside, or the urgent way he whispered her name when he came undone.

It had been considerable time since she’d heard it.

All of a day and a half was spent living with the notion before it became too much: this was clearly the root of the problem. Fitness had been the wrong approach from the beginning.

The only obstacle was getting past any of Solas’ lingering concerns about her well-being. He was far too reserved to initiate any sort of intimacy following an extended period of poor health; he rarely initiated at all. They’d been sharing a bed most nights they had the opportunity, spent countless hours searching each other by candlelight, mapping the most sensitive places and committing every sigh to memory, and still he was hesitant to make the first overtures to sex. He always reciprocated eagerly (if not fiercely) when casual affections turned passionate, but very rarely was he the one to make the first move.

If she did not approach him now the wait would be untenable.

With that in mind she found the next hour she could spare and sought him out.

He was not at his desk that afternoon — a relief, as it would have been considerably more challenging to seduce him in a space as public as the middle of the rotunda. Instead she found him in the library on the second floor. He sat in an overstuffed, low-backed chair tucked into an alcove near the stairs; one he oft chose for the privacy it lent. He was so deeply absorbed in the book he was reading that he didn’t so much as twitch when an acolyte down the hall knocked over a stack and sent them tumbling to the ground with a resounding clatter.

His back was to her as she approached, giving her the opportunity to surprise him. A necessary advantage: if he’d met her eye he would surely see the excitement shining there, and she’d give away the plan before she had the chance to set it into motion.

The rotunda was not terribly crowded at this time of day, with no more than half a dozen others present — all busy with their own tasks. And she very skilled at stealth. No one noticed as she
slipped, silent, from the darkened stairwell and into the alcove. Bared feet making no sound upon the floor.

Solas jumped when her hand brushed his shoulder. Some of the tension easing once he glanced up and saw who it was. “Inquisitor,” he greeted. A necessary formality, but she could hear the smile in his voice as he turned back to his book and added under his breath, “I did not hear you approach.” Then, “How are you feeling?”

“Well, if not bored,” she replied. Off-handedly, so not to show her hand too early. “Working on the backlog, but nearly caught up now. I had some time and wanted a change of scenery. What are you reading?”

Rather than answer her directly he turned the book around to show her the spine, where the author and title were written. Though it was not a tongue she knew well, the form of the runes looked vaguely familiar. “Is that Tevene?” she asked, surprised. The book looked far too new for that.

He nodded. “An older work, though only the title and forward aren’t in the Common tongue. Not a pleasant read, but an intriguing one. A surprisingly progressive collection of accounts from several Tevinter historians regarding the culture of Elf slaves. It is an interesting look at how the stories held by the Dalish evolved separately from the generations of Elves that remained under Tevinter influence following the establishment of the Dales.”

Painfully dry and borderline offensive: an entirely unsurprising choice.

“Sounds fascinating,” she teased.

But then an idea occurred to her. “Read it out to me?”

There was a pause.

Then a sharp, small intake of breath — like a question all itself — before, “You want me to read aloud to you?” he asked, incredulous. “From this book?”

The request was not entirely unprecedented: he’d read to her on multiple occasions, though generally from works of poetry or fiction. And almost exclusively in Elvish. But beyond language lessons she’d made it clear that she enjoyed the simple pleasure of listening to him talk. Jumping at any excuse when they spent time in casual company. He’d never been opposed. If anything, it was clear he enjoyed the attention.

This, however, was a bit outside her usual interests. It would arouse his skepticism, if not his suspicion. A gamble.

“I’m bored,” she quickly supplied, and leaned in closer. Low, over the back of the chair to ensure not only that her next comment would fall solely on his ears, but that her breasts brushed his shoulder. Make him aware of the fact that she wore nothing beneath the blouse. “And I like hearing your voice.”

Clearly, he noticed. Held his body still as stone for the space of a single breath in silent contemplation.

On another day he might politely laugh off the request. Make a clever joke about her toeing the line of familiarity. The balance would be tipped one way or the other depending on how much he missed her company and how much that desire clouded his better judgement. She knew a dozen ways to leverage it; this was merely a test.
And oh, but he did miss her.

Enough so for the ploy to inspire his playful side.

He cast a glance over each shoulder to ensure they were out of earshot of any passers-by, and then replied, “Alright.”

He started at the beginning of the page he was currently on: some uninspired monologue comparing Tevinter’s Old Gods to the Dalish pantheon. It was even more dull than she’d expected, but that mattered little. The goal of this plan was not to capture her interest.

As he read her fingers began to wander. At first just idly playing with the edge of his collar. Pulling at a stray thread and picking off a bit of lint. Then, a brush of her fingertips over the back of his neck in a way that almost seemed purposeful. A mistake; simply forgetting to curb her familiarity for but a moment. A slip, surely, but a safe one for this quiet corner. A touch she had not indulged in for some time.

She did not miss the subtle, downward flex of his shoulders as he suppressed a shiver.

But it wasn’t until she dragged a single fingernail down the back of his ear that she was awarded a catch in his voice — the reaction she’d been waiting for.

He stopped abruptly in mid-sentence. A breath. And, “Ellana,” he began. No title now. Then, more quietly, “What are you doing?”

Faced away from her he did not see the devious half-cocked smile she was sporting. Nor her clumsy attempt to bite it back, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. “Listening to you read the tome you received from Tevinter,” she replied, matter-of-fact.

He laughed softly. “I am beginning to doubt that.”

That she was trying to bother him was now obvious, though for what purpose had yet to be revealed.

“No, really,” she protested in a tone that conveyed absolutely no sense of sincerity. “Study of the appropriation of Elvish history and its effects on the development of unique culture amid Tevinter Elves is a fascinating topic. Please, keep talking.”

This part was always her favourite: when he knowingly let her toe the line, just for the fun of it, and was only just starting to become aware of the opportunity he’d given her in that freedom. He enjoyed their banter — the cat and mouse game of veiled flirtation — and it had been some time since they’d had the opportunity to engage in it so he was, perhaps, a little eager. It came as no surprise that he took the bait. Though not without some caution; loneliness had not completely outweighed sense quite yet. He kept his voice low and squared his shoulders, throwing a glance out to the side every few lines to assure the moment they shared remained a private one.

This time she waited until he made it through another two paragraphs before resuming the gentle touch of his ear. Dragging a curled knuckle along the edge from lobe to tip and down again. Light enough to convey a message without it being a demand.

I miss you.

When she gave him another scratch he stumbled, a little sound of surprise slipping from his lips followed by an involuntary tic of his head to one side.
It was impossible to hide the satisfaction in her voice. “Is there a problem?”

“That is very distracting,” he hissed. Eyes stubbornly locked on the pages of the book rather than risk turning to fix her with the look she knew he wished to.

“Is it? My apologies,” she replied innocently, “I’ll speak plainly.” And sprung her trap with a handful of his collar curled into a fist to hold him still as she leaned in.

There was not a single part of her that didn’t utterly delight in the way his startled gasp was cut short by a curse, whispered sharply, as she caught the point of his ear between her teeth. Flicked her tongue against it, just once.

It was almost as satisfying as the way his fingers tightened to a white-knuckle grip upon the book when she added, “I need you,” in a perfect imitation of the breathy whisper she used in bed when he’d driven her mad enough to beg. The tactic was both incredibly effective and terribly unfair — and she knew it.

It took him a few tries to find his voice.

The fluster highlighted by a blush creeping up his neck. Turning him a lovely shade of pink that he, unsuccessfully, tried to hide by bringing a hand up to block his face from view, pretending to lean on it. His voice was rough when he spoke. “That is not a discussion to be had here.”

As if there was some debate to be had on the matter.

If there was, he’d already lost.

Clearly evident in the way he awkwardly tugged at the hem of his sweater and then lowered the book to cover his lap.

But he wasn’t refusing — and he would, were he not interested. Instead, predictably, he deflected. “You’ve only recently resumed your duties—”

She cut off the excuse before he could finish making it. “You know full well I’ve been keeping a normal schedule for over a week. And training in the mornings. I feel like a caged animal; I have so much energy I don’t know what to do with myself. I’ve spent too long in bed.”

“And yet keen to return to it,” Solas quipped, and cast another cautious glance into the hall. “It’s clear I have no intention of taking a nap.”

The position he had chosen awarded them considerable cover, and while this game most certainly had not been on his mind when he sought it out Ellana was happy to take advantage of the chance to play. One side of the chair faced a wall of bookshelves, leaving it completely concealed by the angle of their bodies. It offered too tempting an opportunity to smooth a hand over his shoulder. If she moved just so she could drag it all the way down his chest and still not be seen, even by someone crossing the hall.

He drew in a deep, long breath through his nose as her fingers roved. Idling to trace little circles over the excited beat of his heart — betraying the calm demeanour he affected. Teasing him with the possibility of continuing lower.

“If you’re concerned about getting to the tower—” she purred, watching his pulse leap at his throat, “—we could find an alternative. I don’t think anyone has even been in the lower archives since the time we were there.”
That drew a tense laugh. “That is no less ill-advised now than it was the first time,” he chided. Then paused. Turning the thought over in his mind. “Did you not just say you had much to attend to this afternoon? There’s also the matter of the meeting with your advisors later…” he tested, letting the question hang between them unspoken.

_Do we have time?_

“I’m not thinking about the meeting yet,” she countered quickly. “I will be in a much better space to tend to it when I have a clearer head. Preferably, after I have spent at least a half hour with you. I feel like I’m going to explode, one way or another, and I’d rather have you there for it.”

“Ellana.”

But the protest was weak; his resistance wearing thin. And it was clear by his manner that it had not been terribly strong to begin with. While he’d made a valiant effort to conceal how readily he responded to the ploy, he wasn’t half as successful as he might have hoped. The pink in his ears and the way he shifted in his seat saw to that.

He swallowed hard. Hesitated on an answer.

But before he could speak it aloud, “Fifteen minutes?” she amended.

And walked her fingers further down his chest.

The look he turned upon her when he finally met her eye was all the confirmation she needed.

—

Ellana took a detour by Josephine’s empty office first. Checked the ledger on the desk to see what the rest of the day held to gauge how long she could safely abscond in her room before someone came looking. The visit doubled as a way to stagger her and Solas’ admittance to the tower, in case either were witnessed on the way.

Fortunately the afternoon had only the one other appointment written in. _Good._ That gifted her at least half an hour; longer, if Josephine had taken her lunch in the Herald’s Rest.

That was more than enough time.

Solas was already waiting for her when she got to her room, poised and ready just inside the door. She didn’t even manage to get it all the way open before he took her by the wrist and _pulled._ Closing and bolting the door shut behind her in a single, fluid, motion that she had barely half a second to wonder if he’d practiced before she was pushed up against the wall of the stairwell. He set to work on divesting her of the flowing blouse she wore; a favoured choice of late for its loose fit. The change in her silhouette was becoming more obvious now, and while the difference may not be immediately clear to a casual observer, a more thorough investigation of would find that the curve of her middle sat just low enough to call question to the excuse of a big lunch.

If he’d noticed, he said nothing about it. Though that could have also been in part due to her decision not to bind her swollen chest with a supportive band that morning. Something he _had_ noticed if his eagerness was any indication.
Burning hands measured the cup of her breast in his palm before sliding around her back to pull her close. Breath heavy on her mouth between kisses.

He was eager — excited — and she loved him this way. All his careful façades torn away. Left at his most vulnerable; the way he only ever was while alone with her. So needy for touch that it took only the slightest rock of her hips against his to elicit a moan. A desperate little sound she felt strike deep between her thighs, parted to welcome the press of his arousal.

The blouse was left at the foot of the stairs with Solas’ belt. His undershirt and sweater went next, dropped in a pile together on the landing. When they made it to the top, standing in only their trousers, she hooked a finger into the waist of his and steered him toward the nearby table. The idea was nixed when he wordlessly, effortlessly, lifted her into his arms and urged her legs around his waist. Then carried her to the bed and dropped her on the downy mattress.

He silenced any protest she might have uttered with a trail of lips and teeth dragged down her body from neck to hip as he worked her bottoms off, then came to kneel upon the floor between her legs.

*Oh, it had been an age.*

But, breathlessly, “Do we have time?” she asked. This was not typically the prelude to a quick encounter. She would happily spend any day at the mercy of his clever tongue, *another* day; there were obligations to attend to.

Both his hands slipped beneath her thighs and grabbed her by the hips. A sharp tug pulled her to the very edge the bed, forcing her to sling a leg over his shoulder to keep herself balanced.

He looked at her, face writ with open skepticism: one raised brow and a coy smile. As if she wasn’t the one just talking about how keenly she needed release. “I don’t anticipate it taking long.”

*That’s awfully confident,* was the flippant reply ready on her tongue. Lost immediately to a choked sound that pushed from deep in her chest with the careful application of his mouth and two curled fingers.

Solas never made a promise he did not intend to keep.

True to his word, it did not take long. So quick that it was almost embarrassing.

She’d chalk it up to sheer desperation but there was something to be said for the level of skill, and devotion, he employed in the task of drawing pleasure from her. Using the rock of her hips to find a steady rhythm to guide her closer while the point of his tongue drew a design on her body only experience could teach.

It sent her head spinning. Lost entirely to the lure of tension building in her core at a breakneck pace; body begging for indulgence even as she fought for a breath. A second. To delay. *Just a moment longer.* Build it higher. Push it back a little more.

*Heat.*

She no longer had the wherewithal to think of anything but *heat*.

A wholly intoxicating awareness of the flush that had spread throughout her body. Rooted somewhere near her middle and rolling outward in all directions — down her stomach, over her arms, her legs, her neck — like waves, enveloping and all-consuming. Skin flushed and sweat-licked in their wake.
Hot.

So terribly, wonderfully hot.

*How can I be so hot, it has barely been a moment…?*

That burning tide that climbed higher, rolling faster, with each crooked stroke of his fingers.

There was a persistent itch beneath her skin; almost uncomfortable in its insistence. A buzz. Familiar: like one of the electric spells he often cast in intimate moments. A pinch of pain with her pleasure.

But this felt different — *off* somehow — too deep and too heavy. Maybe just too long since she’d last felt it. He’d been so hesitant to use magic on her since—

There was a sudden surge, and she crested. Almost too much; too fast. It was her own broken gasp that pulled her back from the brink.

The wave simmered, boiling, just beneath the surface and she knew she’d overflow with it soon. The sensation had crawled all the way up into her *face*. Tendrils of mana curling around her neck and diving into her chest.

She twisted her fingers around handfuls of the sheets and fought herself between the want to draw it all out *just a little longer*, or give herself over to a climax she needed more than air itself in this moment. But… his spell felt different this time. Stronger. Better. And she wanted that to last.

It was intoxicating.

Powerful.

*Full.*

Every part of her positively vibrated with it, holding her right at the edge. And the way Solas’ grip tightened on a quaking thigh told her he was fully aware of it.

She needed…

*Needed.*

More.

More of the *heat*. More of the energy. Spread it further, feel it everywhere, until she couldn’t stand another second.

Just *a little* more.

Then suddenly time seemed to slow for one clear, crystal, moment… and within it, her thoughts finally found purchase.

*Fire.*

“Oh, fuck!”

All the tension, the heat, the swirling restless energy that had plagued her every waking moment since she’d risen from her bed the morning after Solas’ return surged to a blinding peak that bowed her body backward. Curled from neck to toes. Fists full of sheets, an anchor. Only vaguely aware
of the risk of crushing Solas’ head between her trembling thighs.

It seemed to go on forever in the moment. A higher high than she’d experienced in months.

And then everything flowed out of her in a rush.

As though her body had been set alight by blinding flame, roared to life, and was then doused by the tide. Suffocated as quickly as it had flared.

In the aftermath she lay gasping for breath; feeling as though she’d drowned in the pleasure. The ceiling spun when she opened her eyes. Leaving her unbalanced and a little delirious like she’d been sleeping for years and only just now awakened rather than simply lying in bed enjoying an afterglow.

Panting, “Good gods,” she rasped, throat cracked and painfully dry. “My whole body is tingling.” *Ridiculous,* she thought, and yet couldn’t help but say it aloud. She was babbling. *Stop babbling.* “That was incredible.”

She felt, more than heard, his chuckle. A soft breath against swollen flesh and an indulgent, slow, lick of his tongue to taste her release. Then the soft brush of his lips pressed to the junction of her thigh. A little nip of teeth. A tease, and a reminder that this was not yet over.

He’d only just begun to stand — turning to one side to unlace his pants — when she became aware of the change in her senses.

There was an odd smell. Like a hearth but… *not.*

She lifted a hand to wipe away the sweat upon her brow. Began to ask if he’d noticed the scent, but then saw the blackened centre of her palm and paused.

*What on—* 

There was a flicker in the distance just beyond it.

The bed was on fire.

*The bed is on fire?!!* 

In quick succession, a number of things happened.

First, she gasped.

Solas immediately recognized the sound as something outside of what the situation might warrant, and so spun around to face her. Confusion quickly bleeding into alarm as he noticed the flames. But before he could finish bringing a hand up to smother them, she leapt backwards. One foot flying out and hitting him square in the chest with enough force to knock him onto his back and leave him winded.

Fortunately, he recovered quickly. Rose to his knees and sent a blast of cold from a raised palm that engulfed the two small fires, easily dousing them, while Ellana scrambled to the opposite side of the bed with a sheet in hand. Poised and holding it to her chest, ready to throw it on the offending flames should they return.

In the tense seconds of silence that followed her eyes flit between Solas’ look of surprise and the remains of the fire. Then, bewildered, she asked, “What did you do!?”
In all their time together he’d never lost control of a spell quite so dramatically. It was a little absurd: she had barely touched him yet.

But, “I did nothing,” he replied with a shake of his head.

She blinked. It was not the answer she was expecting.

Slowly, he stood. Watching her carefully as he moved, as though she were a cornered animal that might strike if he startled her. He took hold of one corner of the tangled bottom sheet and gave it a sharp tug. Straightened, it revealed the two scorch marks on either side of where Ellana’s body laid; holes full of ash and melted feathers burned straight into the mattress. Each accompanied by five blackened lines that looked suspiciously like fingers.

Solas gestured to one of the marks. “I believe this was your doing.”

A long moment passed where she could do little more than stare back, open-mouthed, and unabashedly in shock.

“What?”

He made his way around the bed to where she sat, still protectively clutching the top sheet to her chest, frozen in the same place she’d landed when she launched herself backward. Her eyes tracked him as he walked, searching for any indication not to take his words as the honest truth he meant them to be. Waiting for the punchline to what could only be a joke. But instead he merely took a seat on the bed next to her and reached for one of her hands. Turned it palm up to show blackened streaks of soot mingling with sweat that collected in the ridges of her fingerprints. Remnants of the now-incinerated sheet she’d held in her fist.

His swiped a clean line across her palm with his thumb, revealing the skin beneath — soft and mottled red under the ash. It did not hurt, but felt sensitive and tender. As though all the archery callouses had been scrubbed away.

With care, he explained, “You summoned a fire spell.” Added, “A very small one—” quickly, upon noting the dawning horror on her face, “—not even capable of leaving your hand. It would not have caused any real damage. Other than to the bed, of course. And then only because it was at such close range.”

The words made sense individually but all together it was utter nonsense.

“What?” she repeated. It was all she could think to say in response. There was nothing to say to such a ludicrous notion. “That’s impossible. That’s not possible.” Denial turned to indignation. “I’m not a mage, Solas!” she asserted. “How is that possible?”

“You did say you were going to explode,” he quipped, and utterly failed to suppress a small smile.

“You did say you were going to explode,” he quipped, and utterly failed to suppress a small smile.

“I set the bed on fire and you make jokes?”

She jerked her hand back from his and stared at her palm, bringing the other up to join it. Both were equally coated in ash. “How is this possible?” she muttered again, as though the answer would become clearer by asking her hands themselves.

Unfortunately they offered her no more insight than Solas’ amused smile, poorly hidden behind a fist to spare himself her ire. It was infuriating that he found cause to laugh. As though it was not a wholly terrifying notion that she might unintentionally, spontaneously, develop the ability to cast a spell after more than thirty years without it.
She thrust her hands toward him. “Did you cause this? Did you do something?”

That gave him pause. Clearly, it was not a question he’d expected. The smile faltered, and his eyes fell to her hands. Held out to him like weapons that might somehow do harm by themselves. After a moment of thought he replied, “Yes, actually I believe I may have.”

He stood, and made for the basin nearby. Picked up a cloth that hung on a bar, dipped it in the water and wrung it out. “There was a chance that a transference might awaken some dormant ability in you; or that the presence of the Anchor would have an unforeseen impact on the process.” Seated astride her, he carefully washed away the ash on her palms and fingers. Folding the cloth over itself after each pass to keep it from smudging. “I will admit I did not spend that long considering the possible side effects.”

Less irritation, more anger now. “You knew this was a possibility and you didn’t think to warn me? What if I’d set something on fire more important than the sheet?!”

Sensing the possibility of an argument brewing, he cut in, “There is no way you would be capable of that kind of power.” It was somewhat reassuring to hear how his firm his conviction was. It cooled her temper — a little. “Even children first discovering their abilities have a deeper source of mana to draw from. Yours is extremely limited, perhaps even finite — I did not sense an aura even immediately following the spell.”

“Your attention was occupied,” she said plainly.

He smirked. “True, but that does not negate my point. Capable mages leave traces when they cast — etheric feedback, or the presence of an aura for a short time — particularly if the spell was cast suddenly, or interrupted.” He gestured to the scorched sheets, holding a hand out as one might to soak heat from a bonfire; turning it to and fro. “For you, there is nothing.” Then he added, “I have my doubts you would even be able to summon at will.”

“Then what was that?” she countered.

He gave her a meaningful look, and with the utmost seriousness replied, “An explosion.”

She had to give him some credit: he managed not to break this time. For exactly four seconds. Then the corner of his mouth twitched, just a little, and it was ridiculous enough to melt away much of her remaining ire.

She laughed, in spite of herself. “Damn it all Solas, you’re enjoying this.”

“I said no such thing.”

“You don’t have to,” she accused. “I can tell you’ve already filed this away to be smug about, you absolute ass.” A brow quirked and his smile grew a little, but he didn’t deny it. Charming, admittedly, but she was still irritated. “You could have warned me.”

“Would I had truly thought this were a real possibility, I would have told you,” he replied honestly. “But it seemed unlikely. Other than this first appearance you may not experience anything beyond a heightened awareness, and only then for the duration of your pregnancy to assist in sustaining it. Regardless of racial affinity, you were not truly born into magic, and it is just as likely to fade away.” Gently, he tucked a loose curl behind her ear. The stubborn one she hated. The one he was always so fond of toying with. “You have nothing to fear from it.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips. The soiled cloth he’d used to clean them he carefully folded into a square and laid upon a porcelain saucer that sat on her bedside table, so
the moisture would not leech into the wood.

When he was done he stood, and crossed the room to retrieve his shirt from where it had been dropped at the top of the stairs. “As you said yourself: you are not a mage. The well from which you’ ve channeled mana is extremely small; even if you were capable of proper casting, the most powerful spell you could muster would do very little damage, if any.” He pulled the shirt over his head. “You’re no danger to others, save for the bedsheets.” A gentle smile. “If it would ease your mind, I can teach you how to redirect energy. You already have some experience in the form of closing rifts; this would not be much different. Just carried out at a considerably smaller scale.”

“I think that would be best,” she answered, with only a little hesitation. If all he said was true — and she did believe him — then that would surely be the smartest course. Still, the idea instilled a small but not insignificant sense of dread. Weak or not, the ability to summon elemental magic seemed like a step up from manipulating rifts. She was in no way equipped to handle any sort of magical prowess, now nor at any point in the future. But, “Yes,” she tried again. Surer. “Alright.”

From the bed she watched him grab his sweater and fold it over one arm. Take hold of the banister and start descending the stairs after his belt. He was leaving.

She frowned. “What are you doing?”

The query stopped him mid-step. “I am… retrieving my clothes.” It was not entirely clear what the question was in regard to, and so he wasn’t sure his answer was the correct one.

“Oh no,” said Ellana as she rose to her feet. She let go of the sheet and it fell to the floor in a pool. Now completely nude, she crossed the room. “We are not done here.”

“I no longer believe we have time,” said Solas. Though he didn’t sound entirely convinced. Already he’d set the sweater back down upon the banister, and his eyes were hardly on hers as she approached. “I can return this evening, if—” A kiss cut the comment short.

His hands hovered in the air a moment, surprised, before finding familiar purchase on her hips. And he returned the kiss eagerly, in spite of his argument. By the time she sweetly ran her tongue along the inside of his upper lip he’d already forgotten why he’d cared to protest at all.

A hand slid down to firmly cup the front of his pants assured he wouldn’t remember anytime soon.

“You can return this evening as well,” she said. Voice measured with authority that begged no question whether this was an order he could refuse. “But if you try to leave this room without finishing what you started I will make it a command from the Inquisition itself.” There were certain advantages to military rank: it would be a shame to waste them. “The door is barred, and there is at least ten more minutes before Josie returns from lunch and realizes I’ve not returned.”

She squeezed, and watched his eyes flutter closed as she repeated his own boast back to him. “But I don’t anticipate it taking that long.”

* *

Several hours and a one new set of sheets later, Ellana stood outside the doors to the war room.

Stalling.
She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Turned in circles. Worried her hands and picked at her fingernails until she’d managed to tear a ragged edge off. Hissed, and softly swore when it was left stinging.

While she was considerably more equipped to face this meeting without the anxious knot of unspent energy needling at her skin, her nerves were hardly calm. “An uncomfortable, but necessary, conversation,” Solas had called it. As if it were so simple. As if he were not incredibly grateful he had no good reason to join her for it. The description was grossly inadequate. It had been ‘uncomfortable’ to set the meeting at all.

Approaching her advisors separately to give them each the ominous request to congregate in the war room after the day’s tasks were completed was uncomfortable. Dodging the Commander’s curious questions about the topic was uncomfortable. Finally admitting to herself that she really should have done this ages ago and had no excuse for why she didn’t was uncomfortable.

Actually doing it was terrifying.

Not just for the fact that she’d be laying out the sordid details of her private life, but also to admit the uncomfortable mess she’d made of it. Then, when it was all out in the open, she’d ask for help cleaning it up from people who should normally have no business meddling in that particular part of her affairs.

Privacy was a peculiar concept among humans by comparison to the Dalish. Humans valued modesty, but thrived on gossip — where clans kept little from each other. There was an expectation of familial, community support, so very few things were held back. Only that which was most intimate: old fears, early memories, whispers shared with a lover in post-coital bliss. Those few secrets she’d kept she guarded fiercely, though they were ultimately harmless in the hands of anyone other than herself.

If she’d learned anything from her time with humans it was that this particular secret, like the many others they kept, was a weapon. To share it was to put it in the hands of another and trust them to wield it without cutting.

She’d spent weeks putting this off — out of fear, uncertainty, or just shameful procrastinating. There was no part of her that wanted to have this conversation, but there was hardly a choice. More importantly, her advisors deserved her honesty… even if it was belated.

In the time since she’d joined the Inquisition they’d become so much more than simply trusted staff: they’d become her friends. Her clan.

Josephine, with her polite manner and wicked tongue. An endless source of political and social connections ready to leverage at a moment’s notice. An insufferable romantic. A dear friend, and confidant.

Cullen, with his tactical smarts and quick thinking that had saved her on the field time and time again. No one could make a crowd fall in line faster and better than he. Yet beneath the armour beat the heart of a terribly sweet man with unwavering loyalty.

Leliana, with her plots and wit sharpened to a knife’s edge. No better spy was there than the Nightingale herself; and no mercy shown to those who might bring harm to their cause. Though despite that, or perhaps because of it, a shameless gossip and prankster to boot.
She cared for them deeply, and propriety aside she legitimately needed their guidance through the rest of this experience… and whatever it might mean for her future. Both personally, and for the Inquisition on a whole.

There was no more time for stalling. No place for cowardice.

This was ridiculous: she was a leader. Such a simple announcement should be easy.

She thought of Dorian’s kind advice — *remember my dear, you’ve killed dragons! This is far less frightening* — then laughed, woefully, when recalling her own reply.

*Breathe,* she advised herself. *Just take a deep breath* — and did so, closing her eyes and letting her lungs fill deeply.

*Reach for the door and pull it open.*

She got as far as grasping the handle before a sudden voice made her leap backwards, heart in her throat.

“Inquisitor!” Cullen greeted, jogging up behind her. His sword rattled in its sheath at his side. “Sorry, I’m a bit late. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.” But when he caught up and saw the stricken look on her face he changed tracks immediately. “Maker, are you alright? Are you ill?” He touched a hand to her shoulder, softly.

“I’m fine,” she said, “You just startled me is all.” Ellana forced a smile.

The one he gave in return was far more genuine. “In that case, my apologies. I’d hate to think you were unwell. It’s been nice to see you around the castle again.” He gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze, and the gesture was kind enough to draw a real smile this time.

A quiet little moment passed where it almost seemed like he wanted to say something more, but ultimately decided against it. Instead he straightened his back and moved astride her, pulling open the door to bid her entry. With a broad smile and a sweeping gesture, “Shall we?” he said.

For a second she thought he might actually offer her his elbow — though, gratefully, he did not. He was often charming, and on most days she happily indulged it; today, however, was not an occasion where she wanted such a kindness extended. It seemed wrong to partake in friendly affection when preparing to announce how she’d spent considerable time lying to him by omission.

So, “Of course,” she replied simply, and ducked her head as she walked in. Allowing him to follow after and close the door behind them.

Her Spymaster and Ambassador were already waiting inside, speaking quietly when the groan of old hinges drew their attention. A sordid topic no doubt, if Josephine’s giggle was any indication. Ellana only caught the end of the conversation — something about an ‘admirer’ — but clearly saw the way Josie touched her fingers to her lips and smiled. It was a tell she’d come to know intimately. The Ambassador’s penchant for chatter was a secret, poorly hidden, and her crooked grin too sweet not to share.

There was but a glimpse of it before she politely cleared her throat and greeted, “Inquisitor.” All business. Pity: a playful grin would have made what came next much easier.

Next to her, Leliana gave only a nod and a view of her expression falling into tight-lipped readiness. Hands joined at her back. Expectant, though not impatient. While the other two appeared genuinely curious, there was something about her manner in particular that gave Ellana the
impression she already had this conversation mapped out.

Cullen took his place at the head of the table, by Leliana’s side, and then all three turned their eyes toward her.

Once more, her heart was in her throat.

Perhaps it was a mistake to do this here. In this room she was strong. In this room she was a leader. She felt like neither, now.

But…

Now or never.

Ellana took a deep breath.

“Thank you for coming,” she began. Needlessly. As if this were a social call they could choose not to heed if they had something better to tend to. They probably all had something better to do. They could be writing battle strategies or negotiating trade routes or resource missions or virtually anything other than—

Focus.

Another attempt: “I wanted to gather you here to discuss a personal matter. I would not normally involve you in my affairs but this one, unfortunately, may require a little finesse to manage as it will affect my position currently, as well as my ability to hold it.” She got stuck there, briefly, and filled the silence with a nervous, “Would you like to sit down?” Gesturing to the chairs at the back of the room.

No one moved.

“Right,” she all but whimpered. And swallowed back the urge to run screaming.

Cullen cut in — sensing her mounting distress. “Is it your clan?”

No matter how many times he used the word it never sounded any less foreign on his lips. As if the concept were so odd that he had to think, each time, to find the term.

“No,” assured Ellana. “Not my clan. This is more personal, I’m afraid.”

More hesitation.

Gratefully — terribly — he cut in again.

“While you may be the Inquisitor there is still some expectation of privacy,” Cullen offered earnestly. And while she did appreciate the naïveté, it felt misplaced in this particular instance. The more he talked the worse it got. “There’s no reason for you to need to share any part of your personal life with us. I hope we have not made you feel otherwise. Your choices outside this room are your own. We all deserve that, at a minimum.”

“Respectfully, I disagree,” Josephine said, and cast a quick glance at Ellana to offer a quiet, ‘my apologies’. Then her eyes locked on the Commander; hard, like a teacher before a wayward pupil. “Ferelden and Orlais watch us closely, and there are aspects of the Herald’s life beyond tactics which are under great scrutiny. Religious affiliation, connections with Dalish clans, those she brings into her inner circle, organizations she allows to conduct business within Skyhold’s walls,
her interactions with nobility and who she chooses to seek an audience with, among other things. Our own opinions aside, we must recognize the importance of cultivating the appearance of a strong and uncompromised leader. To not expose her vulnerabilities. What consequences could it’ve had to share that she suffered an extended illness, for example?”

“Her religious affiliations?” repeated Cullen, blatantly ignoring the rest. He punctuated his disbelief with a sharp laugh. “She’s literally a holy figure to many of the faithful — does it even matter what she follows in private? What difference would it make? Does she not rank above them? She could be a follower of the—the—” He stumbled and stammered for an example, some demon or devil from Elvish lore, and she realized a moment too late where he was going. Watching in terrible silence as he pulled the title from warped memory. “— the Bad Wolf and no one could care at this point because she has been chosen by Andraste herself.”

Josephine bristled. “That is categorically untrue.” There was a sharp edge to her voice now. He’d managed to irritate her — a rare feat. Though understandable given how much care she’d put into her work of diplomacy. “Countless alliances would be put at risk or outright destroyed over it; first and foremost the Dalish. And losing our Elven allies would be a blow to our reputation. She’d be seen as barbaric and untrustworthy. Already, prejudice and ignorance has put enormous pressure on her to exceed what expectations would be had of another in her position. Great care is taken to address the slander that comes with it, regardless of how ludicrous the rumours can become. Not two months ago Leliana threatened to cut out the tongue of a comte for speaking ill of her heritage!”

Cullen levelled her with a look. “Leliana threatens the tongues of ten men before breakfast each morning.”

But Josephine only rolled her eyes. “You are missing the point. The fact remains…”

On and on they continued until Ellana could no longer find the will to keep listening. This was terrible: they were splitting hairs over a topic they had yet to understand. They didn’t even know what they were bickering about and yet still fought with conviction; opposing each other on hypotheticals while she watched and waited for an opportunity to give them something to really fight about.

All the while Leliana watched her. Quiet and dangerous. Sharp, like a hawk. Bright eyes pierced the terrible camouflage Ellana had crafted of a loose blouse and untied pants. Her hands awkwardly crossed, hanging over her stomach. Suddenly very aware of how small she was beneath all of their combined years of knowledge and experience.

This should have been done weeks ago.

“—ludicrous. There is absolutely no reason to have to tailor her entire life so not to offend the good graces of every stuck-up noble in Val Royeaux!”

“That is not what I said. The point I was making was regarding rumour, and how not to actively encourage it. The whole of the Inquisition benefits from a leader who presents with grace and power. Without it, we who follow are reduced to nothing more than blind loyalists.”

“And actively participating in gossip is the answer?”

“Cultivating it—”

“The Herald of Andraste has—”
“I’m pregnant!” Ellana blurted, finally. And watched everything come to a grinding halt.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Worse for each passing second.

She wasn’t sure what she’d expected to happen — she’d avoided envisioning this conversation for as long as she’d avoided having it — but this most certainly wasn’t the ideal scenario.

Leliana did not react at all to the news, though that was not terribly surprising. While she’d hoped the secret would keep, the Nightingale was exceptionally good at her job and she’d be a little disappointed in her if she’d not figured it out already.

Josephine — ever in control — loosed only a small, startled gasp and raised her hand to her mouth. Immediately eyeing her cohorts to weigh their responses before choosing to offer one of her own.

Cullen pulled his brows together and blinked hard. “What?” he remarked, and seemed genuinely puzzled. As though he’d misheard her and was struggling to make sense of what small piece of nonsense he’d understood. “You’re what?”

There was a long enough pause that she’d almost thought to answer him.

Then whatever dam had held back the tide of questions broke, and they all came out so quickly he could barely separate one from the next. “You? Truly? You’re pregnant? There isn’t— I didn’t— but— Maker’s breath how?!”

For the first time since she’d entered Leliana’s eyes left hers, quick to leap at a chance to turn her wit upon Cullen. With one raised brow and a crooked smile she quipped, “One assumes you are familiar with the process, Commander.”

Josephine coughed sharply into a fist, not quite stifling a giggle.

He flushed. Stammered, “Well — of course — I only… that’s not what I meant!” in a jumbled huff. “I was merely commenting on that she— I mean that you—” He turned and gestured in her direction, ready to pepper her with the next logical series of questions, at which point it occurred to him how deeply personal the topic would become and trailed off instead. Awkwardly rubbed at the back of his neck and turned an even deeper shade of crimson. Eyes now firmly set on the floor.

Leliana was enjoying his fluster far too much, so it was Josephine who stepped in to save him any further embarrassment. “What he means to say, I’m sure, is that this news comes as a surprise. You’ve been very careful with what you share of your personal life.” She gave Cullen a look out of the corner of her eye, something halfway between chastising and amused, which was terribly endearing.

It might actually be funny if it was anyone else in this situation.

“If I may ask,” she continued, and looked a little more eager than she had any right to be in such a serious meeting. “How far along? Do you know yet?”

Ellana tried not to wince as she gave the answer. “Four or five months.”

Once more Leliana did not seem at all moved, whereas Josephine and Cullen were visibly taken aback. The Ambassador’s eyes briefly widened, before she blinked away the shock and quickly recomposed herself. Began, “Well, that is certainly—”
Cullen was not so subtle.

“Five months?” he interrupted. The brief attempt to regain some decorum now completely forgotten.

“Or four,” Ellana corrected, unhelpfully.

“This entire time?!”

This time Josephine utterly failed to hold back a laugh. Even Leliana cracked a smile.

It was tempting to allow herself to join in the levity, but there were amends to be made first. She cut in, “I know it’s a shock. And I’m sorry for not telling you sooner. I understand what a difficult position an advanced timeline will put you in. This was not a secret I’d intended to keep this long. This—” She gestured to herself. “—was not intended.”

The smiles fell, and in the hush that fell following the admission a look of something like hurt flashed across Josephine’s face. “If you’ve known so long, why not say something sooner?”

“I was—” she began, but faltered. Now that she was actually tasked to come up with a reason nothing seemed adequate. Not near enough to excuse waiting this long, anyway. She’d kept them in the dark for months… and for what? Her pride? Fear? To avoid embarrassment or discomfort? As if that mattered when she was in such a position. So much time to plan and discuss the future was now lost to doubt, stupidity and a pitiful lack of self-assuredness.

I don’t know how to lead.
I don’t know how to head an organization.
I don’t know how to be worshipped.

I don’t know how to mother.

Finally, “I was afraid,” she admitted.

This silence was somehow worse than the first. She was so terribly small.

Only then did Leliana speak. Her eyes softer now than they had been when this started. “Though inconvenient, your hesitancy is understandable. This situation presents many challenges, most of which I’m sure you’re intimately aware of. But it is nothing we cannot handle — you’re not the first leader to find themselves in a vulnerable position during their tenure. Though it could be far worse: I know Orlais, for one, will be pleased to know you aren’t dead.”

It was an unexpected comment; enough to draw a startled laugh. “Orlais believes I’m dead?”

She smiled, amused. “Your lack of public appearances and reduced communication over the past few months has not gone unnoticed. When we do not provide a reasonable explanation, others are quick to come up with their own. Your untimely death is a more underground theory, and not very believable — but there’s been whispers. The nobility sees themselves as too good to give any weight to that particular rumour, but the fact that you have not taken time to show them otherwise has started to raise questions. Josephine has received quite a few requests for your presence at events you normally would not be invited to, if only to see how we phrase our reply. We are being tested.”

Her shoulders fell: she could guess what was coming next. “Should I anticipate another six-week journey full of terrible dinners and boring meetings to counteract it?”
“No,” chuckled Leliana. Small mercies. “I don’t think that would be in anyone’s best interest. Rather, we could use the opportunity to choose one over the many and make a statement that strengthens our alliance with the leadership you helped install during our last mission there.”

Josephine immediately perked up. “Oh! The ball at The Winter Palace! The Empress will be holding festivities following the week of Satinalia, to cap off the holiday.” Then, to Ellana. “Many dignitaries will be there; an appearance would not only quell any lingering rumour, but also give us a chance to meet with The Marquise regarding support of Orlais’ alienages.”

“Is that wise?” asked Cullen. “Publicly announcing a pregnancy at the palace seems foolish when we cannot possibly vet all the guests.”

Leliana turned her eyes back upon the Commander. “I said nothing of announcing it, only that we would attend.”

He blinked. “You intend to keep hiding it?”

“I fear I may not be able to much longer,” added Ellana, and all eyes turned to her again. It was impossible not to notice how each looked her up and down; searching for evidence. There was not much to find yet, though the way Cullen tilted his head showed it was just enough. “Even if I’m able to keep it secret at the palace, I may not have much of a choice following that.”

“Fortunately, I don’t think we’ll have much trouble at the palace. High-waisted gowns are very fashionable this season,” Josephine offered with a smile. “We can have one made for you that will easily hide a curve. And it will make an excellent impression!”

Leliana nodded her approval. “And as for security, the Commander will escort you.” The suggestion was very matter-of-fact, as though this had already been decided by a meeting Ellana had not been privy to. She might have even believed that were the case if not for Cullen’s blatant double-take.

Clearly he wasn’t in on the plan. “I will?”

Her stern expression brokered no argument, and he straightened beneath it. Clasping his hands over the pommel of his sword to stop from fidgeting. “Yes, you will.” She glanced between the two. “The Commander has years of experience in events like this one, and his presence was enjoyed last year as well. Given that we are invited guests meant to enjoy ourselves rather than conduct business having an attendant is expected. Additionally, if there is any risk of this being discovered while at the palace, it would ruffle less feathers to have you accompanied.”

The Spymaster’s gaze lingered a little long on hers and, oh, suddenly she saw the whole picture. Leliana was crafting a fallback plan, just in case. An assumption would be made; one that would put her in a more favourable light than the truth. She slid her eyes over to Cullen to gauge his response, but the clear mix of disdain and disappointment writ upon his face over being asked to attend at all made it clear he hadn’t picked up on the more subtle nuance of the plan.

That was probably for the best.

With a nod, “I understand,” she affirmed. “And what of after? I’ll admit, I have yet to come up with a way to break the news publicly without inviting trouble.”

Though she looked to her Spymaster as an authority on secrets it was Josephine, surprisingly, that came in with an answer. “You may not have to,” she said. “It’s in everyone’s best interest not to expose a vulnerability to our enemies, and as I said before you’re not the first to find yourself in
this position while holding a position of power. We need only conceal it for the duration. After maybe require a bit of finesse to work out a story that does not cause the Chantry to disavow you, but that is not nearly as dangerous.”

“That’s all well and good, but how easily we can do that depends largely on — well — how large I am to get.” Hands formed the outline of a curve much more prominent than the one she currently had. “I have until late spring I think, and—”

“A double.” Leliana’s interrupted. And once she was assured of everyone’s attention, continued, “To sit in judgement, if needed. Or tend to duties that absolutely require your presence to be witnessed until you are fit to return. We would need only to rely on one when your state becomes obvious enough to remove you from the public eye, then keep her through the first few weeks or months following birth. You would still be the executor of decisions made throughout this time; this individual would merely act as your face, and would be briefed or coached by you personally prior to each appearance.”

She’d admit, it was hard to find fault in that plan. “That’s brilliant, actually.” A sharp nod. “We should get started on finding someone soon.”

The one-sided smile she received in return was a bit on the smug side. “I’m glad you approve, Inquisitor, as I put out the call to find someone two months ago. My agents recruited a city elf with a remarkable resemblance not long after. She’s been undergoing training in a safe house near here for several weeks now.”

In no way did this news come as a surprise.

“Of course you did.”

The briefest second was taken to acknowledge the veiled compliment; a subtle, satisfied nod. “I would also suggest not telling the others quite yet. The event at The Winter Palace is sooner than we’d normally plan for, but these are extenuating circumstances. I’d rather not place the extra pressure on the other attendants you choose to represent the Inquisition; you can make a formal announcement to everyone after. The choice is ultimately yours to make, however.” A pause, to allow Ellana the chance to nod her approval. Then, “Good. The next week will be busy. Josephine can arrange to have a trustworthy tailor brought in to take your measurements sometime in the next day or two, and can coach you on curbing some of the more obvious tells.”

Josephine gave a firm nod, and then broke into a smile she only barely kept politely demure. Holding her lower lip between her teeth. When she could contain it no longer she raised the wooden board she used for note-taking and hid her face behind it.

While the news had certainly broke as a surprise, the larger one came to Ellana herself: Josie was excited for her. All the judgement and fear she had prepared herself for never came. Instead, they rallied at her side. The relief was palpable… and in the end, she felt a bit silly for how obsessively she’d worried over how this might go.

In retrospect, this was obvious — of course they would respond this way.

They were her clan: how could they not?

Even Leliana, ever so stoic, cracked a cheeky grin once she was done with the business at hand. “With that out of the way,” she began, and the smile only grew. “There is only one more matter to attend to.” Her look turned positively predatory as she leaned forward and asked in a stage-whisper, “Shall I give Solas my congratulations?”
Josie absolutely lit up — breaking into a wide, almost child-like expression of joy as she looked to Ellana for confirmation. Rolling up onto the balls of her feet when she nodded. Turning on Leliana, she whispered a triumphant boast, “I knew it!”

Ellana could be embarrassed, or irritated, but the cheer was infectious. She couldn’t help but indulge it. It was the first little piece of joy she had been able to find in this; to share with her friends. A heavy weight was finally off her shoulders, and she leapt at a chance to revel in a moment of warmth and camaraderie. Perhaps it didn’t have to be so terrible after all.

It was funny; amid all the turmoil she’d all but forgotten her advisors’ unapologetic love of gossip — if it was all suspected she’d taken a lover, their identity had likely been a point of speculation even longer than the affair had actually carried on. Naturally, the two of them had come up with some idea.

Cullen, on the other hand, was clearly out of the loop.

Absurdly, he laughed.

Repeated, “Solas?” Confident, like he was in on the joke. “Why Solas?”

All eyes turned to him.

There was a long, painfully awkward pause where one could almost see the gears of his thoughts grinding forward at a snail’s pace before something finally clicked… and he realized the implications of the comment.

He leaned forward, one hand braced against the edge of the war table, and let out a high little laugh.

“Andraste’s tits I think I’ll take that chair now.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey ya'll, we're going to a ball.
“Concentrate,” Solas ordered again.

It was the third time he'd said it in as many minutes.

The repetition was beginning to get under her skin.

He was firm, though not unkind. Even when she pushed him to the limits of his patience he maintained a calm that Ellana envied. Putting a crack in his composure took considerable effort — a skill she’d become exceedingly good at over their months together — and though this task had yet to truly test him the hours had lent a tight edge to his voice. A tell that his poise was beginning to slip. He’d earned it: they had spent considerable time at this work. At least it felt that way.

Time seemed to move at an excruciating crawl. Minutes passed like hours, and hours like days, as they sat facing each other on the floor of her tower room. Long stretches of silence passed, unbroken, save for Ellana’s rhythmic breathing as she searched herself. Though for all her efforts she had minimal success. She was tired. Sore too, from sitting so long on the stone. Hopeful… but less so as time went on. Each minute spent was its own terrible eternity when, yet again, nothing came from her insight.

Together they were working on the theory that she might be able to harness some control of magic. With his guidance — along with practice and patience — she could be taught to hone the ability like any other youth who had just come into their powers. Better even, as she had the advantage of age, and that her first accidental cast proved far less destructive than was typical of emerging mages. Everyone knew a story about someone who’d set the furniture on fire or blown up vases.

Then there were the more morbid tales. The ones whispered in the dark around a campfire like scary stories. But instead of demons stalking lonely babes in the night, they told tale of children who’d burned their house down with their parents still inside. The ones who were doomed before they ever had a chance. And disappeared when the Templars, like monsters, came calling.

All she’d done is scorch her bed.

Though he made no promises, it was clear Solas believed the task of teaching her control would not be as challenging as it had since proved; that competence would follow naturally after discovery. In the days since she first cast a blaze upon the sheets she’d shown a sensitivity to magic that exceeded his first appraisal of her skill. While she’d yet to cast again it suggested the possibility that she might have the potential to become a proper mage, and that excited him. He was eager to begin mentoring her, and his phenomenal gift in spellcraft surely meant she’d be set along a path of learning to hurl lightning and ice in no time.

Instead, she’d spent days at it and failed to make any progress at all.

Hours were sunk into the hard work of accomplishing absolutely nothing other than wasting a perfectly good evening. To say it was disappointing was an understatement, and it was difficult not to linger on that glaring failure while watching Solas manipulate the smallest of spells with an ease she couldn’t imagine ever possessing a fraction of.

He coached as he shaped the fire, “Focus not on the flame itself but on what sustains it. The way a
spell draws from the Fade. Energy is moving in a constant cycle — as an exchange — to maintain the link that creates magefire. There is a thread that connects its presence here to the Fade: you need only to find it to change the form of the spell. Or to make it your own.”

At his urging, Ellana raised both hands aloft, cupped around the flickering light Solas held in his palm. Resolute in her focus, she closed her eyes and held her breath. Narrowed her thoughts upon nothing else but the desire — the need — to shape this spell. Make it larger and fuller. To flare with what energy she could give it.

“Find that thread.”

This fire was small. Simple. A meagre cast even the weakest hand was capable of.

And she was powerful.

She wielded the Anchor and closed rifts with naught but a whim. The Fade was everywhere, all around her, and she had the means to bend it to her will. Had the means of making its power her own.

Ellana thought of her fellow mages on the field — Solas, Dorian and Vivienne — and the gestures they used to cast. Each had a different style, different strengths and predilections, but there were commonalities among all magic users that even an untrained eye could perceive. A certain grace with their hands. The flowing movements of their arms. The purposeful way they held their fingers, even at rest, as though they always had one on the pulse of the power they wielded.

She thought of Vivienne: graceful and strong, easy with her gestures. The delicate bend in her wrist and her ring fingers tucked in. She’d be pleased to know she served as an example.

Ellana mimicked the pose.

The Anchor tingled in her left palm. A growing sensation of pins and needles that promised her new potential, once locked away but now awakened. She had only to grasp it. It was right there for the taking.

Reach out and find it, she urged herself.

Feel it.

Minutes passed in that space.

And her frustration mounted exponentially for each one gone.

“Concen—”

“I am concentrating!” she snapped, and fixed Solas with a withering glare. He said nothing, but the thin press of his lips conveyed his exasperation clearer than words could have.

That was enough. She’d had enough. They were done for the night.

She had no more insight now than she already possessed when they began. Every trial had ended the same: not a single, solitary, thing had changed in her other than an improved ability to sense the veil. Spells he cast upon her had the same effect as they had a week prior, Solas sensed no aura from any of her attempts, and neither of them could connect in any way to the mana she theoretically possessed.
The magefire instruction might as well have been an illusion for all the good it was doing.

“Your instructions are vague and inadequate,” Ellana accused. Making no effort to hide the cynicism in her tone. “I can barely make sense of them! ‘Take hold of the energy’, ‘find the thread’… you speak in terms that you expect me to be familiar with but without any experience in magic beyond fighting it you might as well be giving me lessons in Qunlat.” Weary, she looked him up and down. Added, “You may be a talented mage Solas, but you are a poor teacher.”

He frowned, and vanished the flame with a flick of his wrist. “And you an impetuous student.”

A bitter laugh. “You’re far from the first to say so,” she countered. With a heavy sigh she lowered her hands. Tented her fingers together, stretching her wrists to relieve the tension the hours knit into her bones. “This is pointless. I’ve never been a quick study, and I’m not certain there is something here to learn at all. You said yourself: I am unlikely to have even the most meagre magical skill, and even if I had, it wouldn’t be enough to do anything with.”

It was a deliberate perversion of what he’d said. Words meant to assure her of her safety rather than condemn her skill — she knew it as well as he did. He meant to argue it, but only got as far as opening his mouth before she cut him off. She was properly frustrated now and wanted him to know how futile the endeavour felt.

“Did I ever tell you that, as a child, Keeper was so discouraged by how slowly I took to the bow that she had me taken to a part of the forest known for wolves and left there for an evening in the hope that fear would be a better motivator than praise?”

That gave him pause. Solas raised an eyebrow. “You did not.”

“I was twelve, I think.”

“That seems a rather harsh approach for someone so young,” he commented carefully. The story was clearly meant to serve as an example of her being a poor student, but the experience reflected more upon the tutelage she was given rather than her capacity to learn from it. Distasteful — though a part of him was curious enough to follow it with the obvious question: “Did it work?”

“Yes, actually. By the time I made it back to the encampment I’d developed both a capable proficiency with a short bow and a crippling fear of wolves that followed me through my teenage years.”

Dryly, “A sensible fear, if any were,” he quipped.

“Very funny,” she chided in return.

But the joke awarded him a small smile in spite of her efforts to curb it. One he returned, so the repartee would ease some of the tension. “Be that as it may, I must disagree with your position: I’ve seen you take well to many skills. Your literacy, for instance, has progressed at a rate that far outpaces most. Many who start this late in life do not gain even a fraction of your capability. The obstacle to your learning is not your intelligence—” The compliment was balanced with a pointed look. “—It is your patience. A virtue that often eludes you.”

He was right, of course, but she didn’t need to give him the satisfaction of actually conceding the point.

Instead she groaned and leaned backward against the foot of her bed, giving her space to stretch her legs out. Her hips ached. Hours of sitting cross-legged had left her stiff and sore. Discouraged, in spite of the merit of Solas’ words.
If all these evenings spent trying to tap into her theoretical power had resulted in nothing but frustration, and this truly was the pace at which this would continue, would a positive sign even be worth the effort?

How would success even be measured? Truly, what was the most realistic outcome in of all this?

A spark?

A shock?

A single snowflake hung in the air for a fraction of a second before melting away? Or did Solas envision some sort of miraculous explosion of power?

Admittedly, it was what she’d envisioned… a thought that alarmed as much as it excited her.

She placed a hand upon her middle; gently rest atop the swell that was only just large enough to make her feel full when she bent at the waist. More noticeable now that she reclined. The curve was new, and somehow always managed to draw her touch when her hands were idle. It was its own sort of magic. A habit borne of the awe that had begun to eclipse her fears.

A habit she was trying hard to break.

And so, thinking better of it, she quickly moved her hand to the floor instead. It was bad form to cradle what you were attempting to conceal.

Josephine’s instructions rang in her ears: ‘Mind where you rest your hands. Work to get into the habit of keeping them at your sides now, as the drive to place them elsewhere will only grow stronger as you progress. Most will fail to notice your changing shape provided you don’t draw any attention to it, even though you may find it impossible to ignore.’

She was right: it was becoming increasingly difficult.

Solas was watching her. Smiling, slightly, in that way he did when he was amused or found her endearing. He’d noticed.

Their eyes met, and his gaze lingered there a moment before he pushed to his feet and joined her against the bed. Arms draped loosely across his knees.

“Perhaps we should try a different approach,” he suggested.

A smooth, practiced wave of his fingers and turn of his wrist was all it took to draw another fire from the Fade. He made it look so terribly easy.

“Try to take it.”

A single, curious brow raised and, “Take it?” she repeated. A nod affirmed the instruction, though he offered no further explanation. It was as vague as any of his other attempts to teach her.

With considerable skepticism she reached out a thumb and forefinger and tried to pluck the spell from his palm. The way one might go at any tangible object if you intended to collect it and put it in your pocket.

Solas pulled his hand out of her reach just before her fingers passed through the corona of the flame, sparing her a burn. Laughing, “No, not like that,” he chided. “Move the fire to yourself. Use your will, not your physicality.”
That was infuriating. *A different approach my ass*. *He* was infuriating.

“I have absolutely idea what that means, Solas.”

Though his smile was kind it did little to cool the resurgence of her ire. He tried again, “Here, let me show you,” and raised his free hand to mirror the first, curled his fingers in until they touched, and then flicked them open again. In an instant the flame had disappeared from the hand that cast it, and reappeared in the other. Travelling from palm to palm as though he’d simply taken it out of the air, just as he’d said.

He repeated the motion twice more, passing the spell back and forth as he explained, “It is less an act and more of a feeling. You are redirecting the energy; shifting it along a plane rather than physically moving it from one place to another. Think of a glass full of water: if you were to pour another into it, it will overflow and spill — displacing what was already inside. What you are doing here is similar. By directing your own energy at the spell you can harness what spills over. Then, pull it toward you. This time, make the aim to redirect rather than control, as you were before.”

Once more he presented her the fire. It floated in his open hand like a gift, bright and simple.

She tried to mimic his movements. Hands raised, held aside his own; fingers curled in on her left while the right she kept open and loose.

A moment was spared to shake off her impatience and, *the flame is not solid*, she told herself. *It has no form. Feel its presence, not its weight.*

In her mind she saw herself wielding the spell as he might. Formless. Moving it from hand to hand: between his and her own, then back again. She took another deep breath to steady herself… then, carefully, pushed.

And something happened.

The fire moved!

Flowing out of Solas’ palm and into hers. Like water, displaced. Just like it was supposed to… sliding between the cradle of her fingers.

For a few thrilling seconds she had succeeded: this small task had not completely eluded her. She could control the flame. The potential was real!

She lifted her hand to Solas in triumph.

At which point she lost her focus and the fire immediately, painfully, burned her.

“Shit! Fenedhis! Fuck!” The spell disappeared as she shook her hand out. “In’nuis garahnen vun!”

Solas laughed brightly, making no effort to hide his amusement. “Tel’ha, y ajuathe”

“Blast it all, Solas!” she yelled back. It rankled all the more to hear him speak to her reflexive cursing in his native tongue, knowing she still struggled with fluency. “I don’t even know what that means!”

She’d have thrown something at him had she the means, but unfortunately (fortunately) there was nothing suitable within reach. She settled for the edge of the unmade sheet hanging off the foot of the bed. Gave it a sharp tug for slack and then used it to hit him in the shoulder. While it failed to
give him so much as a sting, the effort was worth something to her anger.

Though it did little to chide him. “My apologies,” he managed through laughter. A last cough was tucked into a closed fist to give him the extra second to compose himself. “Perhaps we should stop for now.”

“Or perhaps I should simply find a new teacher. I think I’d be better off with Dorian or Vivienne.”

While not untrue, she wouldn’t deny that it was petty to choose this moment to say so. When a knot appeared in his brow it awarded her some satisfaction to know it hit its mark. Any cut to his ego would sting; if Solas was anything, it was proud.

Predictably, “Why?” he asked. As though it were a ludicrous notion. Letting others in on this development risked his secrets more than hers, but that wasn’t the point he was making: his prowess far outmatched that of their friends’.

And really, that was the entire issue. He brought so much more to the table than the average mage.

“Because literally no one else in all Thedas uses magic the way you do!”

She flung out a hand — motioning, indignant, to the whole of him. “You perform even the smallest acts with an ease I’ve never witnessed and don’t try to tell me that’s typical of all mages because I have seen the way you play up the use of your staff in the company of others. Your skill exceeds theirs. And in spite of what you may hope, this is not innate for me; I didn’t grow up using magic, nor even in the company of magic users. Not really. We had only a few in my clan and their capabilities were literal worlds away from your own! In fact most of my exposure to magic has been either through you, the mages that have been recruited to the Inquisition, or those we find ourselves up against in battle. It remains a complete and utter mystery to me how it is that any of you are capable of drawing upon the Fade; to manipulate it at will. I understand the theory, and I know that something in me may be different, but the effort I must put into understanding it is going to be more like the experience of a human child than that of Elvhen like yourself.”

She paused there to let a pointed silence speak for her, catching her breath. “You are different,” she concluded, her eyes darting between his. She gestured between them. “We are different.”

A pained expression crossed his face. Weary, but hardly unmoved by her words. He took hold of the back of her head, cradling it gently, and pressed a kiss to her forehead once she allowed herself to be pulled closer. “Ar’an’or, Elvhen. Thuast, bellanar atha em’an.”

Ellana sighed. “In Common, please.”

She felt him smile against her temple. “We are not so different. Though, there are times I forget the years that allowed me the luxury to perfect my skills. In that, you are right.” His arm slipped downward to her shoulder, urging her closer still so that she might tuck her head into the crook of his neck. The position gave him the freedom to draw his fingers through the waves of hair that cascaded down her back. Hold her until the tension finally eased from her shoulders.

“Might I make a suggestion?”

It was difficult to stay angry with him while at the mercy of his affection. “Hmm?”

“If you truly intend to ask for help elsewhere, I would choose Dorian over Vivienne.”

She smirked. “Won’t he be flattered to know you think so highly of his skills that you would recommend his tutelage.”
“On the contrary: I find his approach to spell-management ostentatious and superfluous,” Solas corrected, before the suggestion could be mistaken for a compliment. “The Enchanter is an accomplished mage, but arrogant, and that would not complement your lack of patience.”

She trusted he was not lacking enough self-awareness to miss the parallel. “And I’m sure this has nothing to do with Dorian being less likely to revel in the glory of succeeding where you failed?”

He gave her a look she could feel without meeting his eye. “If anything, he is more likely.”

“Fair,” replied Ellana. “You may have to shoulder the weight of his ego if he does manage to teach me something.”

“A burden none have ever borne.”

They settled into comfortable silence. A warm embrace in front of the hearth enjoyed with the agreement, unspoken, not to push the matter any further for tonight. There were precious few hours left in the day that they could spend privately in each other’s company before duty called.

The travel preparations for Halamshiral were coming to a head. Josephine set their schedules well in advance: Dennet already had the mounts prepared for the first leg of the journey, and a message was sent to the city to ensure secure transport and lodgings were waiting for them upon their arrival into Orlais. While horses were their preferred way to travel, a week straight of it left riders exhausted and sore. A fresh and well-rested entrance was required in any event where politics may play, and so the comfort and discretion offered by a carriage made it an attractive option this time. The horses would be boarded at one of the Inquisition’s camps outside the city.

Ellana had only ever ridden in a carriage a few brief times before. It seemed a garish and decadent way to travel. Unnecessary. Noble hosts had offered their services during several of their previous visits — ‘*So much better to enjoy the sights from a seat of comfort!*’ — but they’d never taken advantage of it for real travel before now.

What a strange role she’d come to play: the once-wild Dalish tamed by a couture gown and the silken trappings of a chariot to pull her. A tale fit for the conceit of the Orlesian court. During her last foray to the palace she’d managed to maintain a connection with her roots by way of bared feet and a face proudly marked by June’s Vallaslin. She’d have neither now. This time, it was too important to blend in. Adopt the opulent culture of the nobility as her own so she might dance her way through the evening like a proper lady.

Though she’d enjoyed the attention she received the year previous, it had hardly been lavished upon her. She’d earned the respect of the court through her clever dispatch of Florian and the revelation of Gaspard’s duplicity. Acts that led to reuniting Celene with Briala, and appointing her Elvish ambassador to Orlais’ troubled alienages.

There’d be no such opportunity here. This would be a charade.

*It’s all pageantry,* Vivienne once said of court. High-heeled shoes to go with a flute of wine and a mouthful of gossip. A dress, like the colourful plume of some exotic bird, to draw the eye from a curve it might otherwise linger on. Pageantry to sell the story of her seduction by the luxuries of power, rather than by an elven apostate.

At the very least she’d have a full complement of allies to help her endure. Commander Cullen to guide her, Bull and Cassandra to guard her, and Vivienne and Solas to keep their ears on the court. She had only to make it through one or two evenings of festivities before she could return to Skyhold and then not have to think about formalwear and soirees for at least another year.
Parties were exhausting... she had no idea how Josephine managed to consistently and thoroughly enjoy them.

The journey there was the only part worth looking forward to. It seemed like an age had passed since she’d ventured outside the fortress; she craved the freedom of the world beyond snow-capped peaks.

The smell of the high mountains was different from what she’d grown up with. Empty and cold; there was nothing wild in the air. The longer she stayed cooped up in the Frostbacks the more homesick she became. The forest called to her. She dreamed of a camp set in a quiet clearing of evergreens. A pine fire spitting sap beneath a spit of fresh rabbit — venison, if the hunt was good — roasting until the skin was browned and crisp.

Sleeping rough in a fur-lined bedroll pitched under the stars.

Or a tent shared with a lover, if they were lucky enough to steal an hour together. Bellies full of meat and sweet wine sipped from travelling skins.

A nudge pulled her attention from the reverie.

Hard, insistent, and sudden enough to give her a start — stealing a gasp from her lips. Her fingers were instinctively drawn to the source. Low: under her shirt, and below the waist of her pants. A little left and below her navel, where she’d felt a flutter before. She pushed back — searching for whatever little bump or knobby limb was responsible for such a jab.

It was not the first time she’d felt movement, she was a few weeks beyond the quickening, but it was by far the most insistent. Typically, it was limited to little flutters so faint she could almost mistake them for the pops and rumblings after a hearty meal. She was only able to tell the difference when she lay in bed at night, wide awake, pondering the spark of life her body nourished.

Solas’ hand was upon hers then. “What is it?” he asked, curious, but intuitive enough to have some inkling. The eagerness in his voice gave him away. There was an answer he was clearly hoping to hear, and it was a joy to watch his face brighten when she gave it to him.

“Kicking.”

The expression he wore then was one she’d never seen before, and would deeply cherish. Excitement, curiosity, and a touch of indecisiveness evident in the way he withdrew his touch. Drawing back not for any untoward reason, but simply because he wasn’t entirely sure what etiquette should inform his desire to share this moment with her.

His hand hovered in the air, hesitant, and he asked, “May I?”

“Yes.” She couldn’t help but laugh. “You don’t have to ask, Solas.”

His sheepish smile was almost as endearing as his utter bewilderment over how to proceed from there. Where to place his fingers and what position to find the rest of him to best facilitate it. After several jerky, halting attempts he finally settled on pulling her between his legs — her back nestled against his chest — so he might comfortably wrap an arm around her and rest his hand upon her stomach.

But, too high — she took hold of his wrist and slid it further down. Below the turned-down hem of her breeches. “I’m not quite that big yet. It’s lower than you’d expect.”
A moment passed in expectant silence before—

“Did you feel that?”

—a little twist, just beneath his fingers. Subtle, compared to the previous movement.

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “I’m afraid I didn’t.”

Ellana twisted her mouth in disappointment. Still too small.

Although …

“Could you feel it with a spell? The way you did when you first found it, after we returned from the Fallow Mire? Or when you check for injuries after battle?”

It seemed a perfectly reasonable suggestion, but when the silence stretched on long enough that she was moved to turn around and face him, she found he looked rather uneasy. Brows drawn as he answered, “That is less searching, and more noticing” Diverting the conversation, rather than answering her directly, was a tell of his discomfort she was intimately familiar with. “It is nothing more than comparing one’s existing knowledge of physiology with a present state to detect changes; a shift in energy, or a weakened aura. And it’s poorly utilized for diagnosis.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“The technique is inelegant,” Solas countered. “I am not—” He stopped — hesitated — thinking over his words carefully before finally admitting, “I have very little experience in this manner of magic, and I am unsure of its effects.”

He was nervous.

It was rare to catch him at a disadvantage, there were very few things he lacked enough experience in to avoid. Most were practical skills, like sewing holes in your clothes or foraging mushrooms. Gaps in his repertoire that could be hand-waved or stumbled through with his unique combination of keen observation and quick wit… but for this he hadn’t the slightest experience to go on.

Her smile was meant to be comforting, but it was hard to hide how thoroughly charmed she was by his naiveté. She said, “This is a staple of Dalish mage midwifery. I’ve seen it used a hundred times. There’s no harm.”

For the space of several breaths he said nothing. Blue eyes wary as they darted between hers, considering the proposition. The assurance failed to convince him until she added, “If it does not hurt me to check for broken bones, this won’t either. What is it you said? Use your will to push, not to control?”

At that he smiled. Worry soothed, he nodded once and pulled her back into his lap as she’d laid before.

Still, it took him a moment to work up the nerve to put his hands back on her body, cradling the tiny curve between his palms. She could feel the rise of his chest as he took a breath and the way the air sharpened just before he began to cast.

It was subtle magic. Light and formless when it first touched her. Gentle, sliding beneath the surface of her skin… then heavy as it swelled with intent. Sinking low and deep to wrap her in warmth. She knew this well: the way his mana felt as it searched for a broken bone, an old injury, a fresh scar.
A life.

There was a quiet gasp, and then he held his breath. Fingertips pressed firmly to her bare stomach, lest some small movement break the connection.

“I feel it.”

It was barely a whisper: reverent and precious.

“Not movement,” he was saying, “But… I believe I can feel your heartbeats.” A quiet, “So fast,” he added almost too soft to hear.

The discovery was exciting, but the wonder in his voice proved the better gift. The simple truth of life within her had nearly rendered him speechless and she loved him dearly for that rare and unguarded display of awe.

She smiled. “I’d always heard that the faster it was, the more likely it is to be a certain sex — though I cannot remember which.”

“A girl,” Solas answered, off-handedly. So much so that it startled a laugh — the casual delivery, more than the fact that he possessed the knowledge, that surprised her.

“How did you know that?”

“I read it. There is a surprising amount of folklore mixed into purported texts on the topic.”

Curiouser and curiouser. “You were reading texts about pregnancy?”

He chuckled, though it was more sheepish than mirthful. “It was in the library,” he explained. “And I would be loathe to call them such. It was largely superstition.”

Ellana craned her head back until she could see him properly. Flashing a cheeky, upside-down, grin. “And what does superstition tell you? Is there a ruling piece of folklore that could give me an answer ahead of time?”

That won her a proper laugh. “There are many, many conflicting theories. Regarding all manner of criteria, from the height of the mother to her favoured sleeping position. No one seemed more authentic than any another. Some were— oh!”

This movement was even stronger than the first. A slow, deliberate push beneath his fingers.

He blinked in surprise. Then smiled, meeting her inquisitive gaze.

“That one I felt.”

Four raps against the door startled them both, and Solas’ spell was withdrawn with the sudden snap of a tether breaking. The silence that followed felt almost oppressive: for a few moments they’d managed to forget the existence of anything outside her tower room.

And when Ellana did not immediately respond to the reminder, “Are you expecting someone?” Solas prompted.

“No,” she replied. Then, louder, “Who’s —?”

The answer came before she finished asking the question.
Before it was even apparent that she’d tried.

“Inquisitor! Lavellan, are you in?”

It was Josephine. And she sounded excited. This late into the day that could only mean one of two things: either they’d set a date for a card game or tea that had slipped her mind, or she’d brought something by to surprise her.

Something that was almost certainly terrible.

“Oh no,” she moaned, “I know what this is.”

Ellana stood, leaving behind a bewildered Solas as she made her way to the stairwell. The door was not locked, but Josephine would not enter without express invitation, and so waited patiently outside her chambers until that was offered.

Decorum could only hold her so long, however… Once the door was opened, she all but leapt into the room with her gift. A long, expensive-looking, garment cover folded across her arms. Containing what could only be a gown large enough for several individuals to wear at once, if its loft was any indication.

Josephine wasted no time. Before Ellana could manage a proper greeting she’d already pushed past her and begun climbing the stairs.

“It arrived this afternoon but I did not get a chance to see it until a few moments ago,” she was saying, positively brimming with excitement. “The tailor included a letter assuring that our instructions were followed to the letter. I was concerned the measurements might no longer be accurate, as it’s been nearly two weeks since they were taken, so I hope you don’t mind that I requested a fingers-width of ease be added to the final product. Although that may prove unnecessary since you’ll be wearing a corset. The fit can be adjusted around the waist, but I would not recommend we rely on that too much as that might disrupt the line of the bodice. If needed I can have someone brought in for some last minute adjustments but I’m hoping that’s not necessary. If you could try it on we’d have a better idea of what else needs to be done. There are several layers, and while ideally you won’t need to call upon the aid of someone else to help you into it, the buttons on the back might require another hand. Perhaps Vivienne— Oh!”

The monologue stopped abruptly once she reached the top of the stairs. “Hello, Solas.”

A polite nod and, “Lady Montilyet,” he returned.

Ellana reached the landing two steps behind. Her eyes caught Solas’, now standing with his hands clasped behind him, and it was clear by his posture that he intended to leave as soon as he was awarded the opportunity. Though her advisors were now aware of the affair, he was not the type of lover inclined to show casual affection before them. Being found in her quarters at an hour this late, while she was so nearly dressed down to her underclothes — jacket gone and chemise untucked — already suggested a level of intimacy that tested the limits of his comfort.

Gratefully, Josephine stepped to one side and cleared a path to the door before the encounter could go from merely startling to properly awkward. Still, she offered a hopeful, “You could stay. We could use your assistance with the buttons.”

He smiled graciously and, “No, thank you,” he replied. “I’m sure it would be better not to rely on my help for the task. Additionally, I have yet to prepare for the journey.” He tipped his chin at each of them in turn. “Ambassador, Inquisitor — enjoy the rest of your evening.”
A painfully, unnecessary, strict formality that did not go unnoticed.

Once he’d left, “I hope I didn’t offend him. I didn’t mean to imply anything inappropriate,” Josephine lamented.

“No,” Ellana assured, and offered a smile. “Don’t worry about it. He’s just—” New at this. Private. Terribly awkward. “—like that,” she settled on, and by the look she received in turn she knew the intent was understood.

She nodded toward the garment on Josephine’s arm. “What’s it look like?”

The initial reveal was both better and worse than she’d feared.

There were so many layers. Even with Josephine’s practiced hands to guide her she imagined it would take at least half an hour to get into it all. Just laying out all the pieces on the bed took ten minutes. And it weighed far more than it any right to considering how fine and delicate the work.

At first, her most pressing concern was for her ability to move around in it, though Josephine assured her the weight would feel balanced when worn.

But, it was impressive, Ellana would admit — expensive. The kind of gown she’d admire on someone else. The beadwork alone had to be worth a small fortune. Polished glass dyed iridescent green and tidal blues hand-sewn into spiralling, dancing patterns that lapped at the sides of a satin bodice. The waist, while lower than what had first been suggested, was disguised with a wide ruched sash that draped, low, across flared hips and then crossed in the back before disappearing into a sea of silken skirts. Providing the necessary discretion without sacrificing the cut of her silhouette.

A low neckline coupled with the trim fit of the corset ensured she cast a particularly flattering one. If her swollen breasts had caused her burden, the lift provided by the corset’s boning ensured it would not be one that bothered her with their weight borne upon her collar instead of her chest.

That part required the most practice: donning a corset was not something she’d had to do before. The dresses and uniforms worn for previous events had never required one. Her first attempt made full use of Josephine’s assistance, after which she was helped out with half the laces still tied so she might practice getting into it on her own. Twice she caught her smalls in the knots and once her hair before she succeeded in slipping it on and tightening the laces without help.

Gratefully that proved to be the biggest challenge, and once she’d won it the rest came easier. It was just a matter of ensuring she remembered all the layers.

A thin silken shift over her smallclothes — “We will get you new ones,” Josephine commented upon finding them worn threadbare — with two sets of skirts and odd little padded pieces, like saddlebags, worn on her hips to shape them. A long-sleeved satin blouse that hung off her shoulders, the corset, and finally the bodice embellished in shimmering beads. Slipped carefully over her arms and then fastened with ribbons wove through silver grommets.

When she stood fully dressed, Josephine fetched the tall mirror from the corner of the room and set it before her.
The sight stole her breath.

On the hanger, in pieces, she’d not appreciated the way the dress was made to appear when worn. Shifting hues of colour that began with a deep, rich indigo at her shoulders; bleeding into a lighter shade of blue at her waist, before finally fading into pale silver. A lace trim — fine, and dyed a soft grey — hung from the edges of her silk sleeves like a halo. Each part made with such careful attention to detail to ensure the final result was nothing short of exquisite; she felt like a walking painting.

The sheen of the fabric caught the hearth and candles as though it was sewn with their light; a dress that shone like stars. And when she moved across the floor the gentle shift and sway of the skirts made the inspiration of its design undeniable.

“It’s like an ocean,” she marvelled. The bottom hem was even dressed with pearls. A contrast to the darker waves that peeked out from beneath the innermost layer of skirting. Sea-foam on a moonlit shore.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Josephine praised, reverent. Dark eyes wide and sparkling as she admired the majesty of the work.

It must have taken an entire team to pull this off, thought Ellana. Between the discrete fittings and tight deadline it would be a wonder simply to provide her with a modified version of the last outfit she’d had made. This was a feat. She’d never seen anything like it.

It would hardly be a show-stopping competitor at the palace next to their wide skirts and extravagant ruffles dripping with polished gems… but its style offered a more organic, simple, beauty that appealed to a taste she didn’t know she had.

What’s more, the person that looked back at her was beautiful. Elegant. And looked so little like herself that she was moved to unabashedly stare. Running a finger delicately across her own neck to assure that her reflection did the same.

“Whatever we paid for this, it wasn’t enough.”

A fleeting, wearied, weight crept into Josephine’s brow — her face peaking over Ellana’s shoulder in the mirror’s surface. An expression that begged her not to press for details. “I assure you, it was.”

Treasury management was not something she had a mind for on the best of days; the value of a custom dress made no more sense to her than the prices set in a store or the cost saved by cobbled one together out of scrap. Dalish did not often trade in coin, but when they did it was in quantities far less than the thousands the Inquisition regularly bartered with.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

A turn to the side allowed her to trace a curious eye along the line of her profile. “I don’t think you can tell I’m much bigger,” she remarked, smoothing a hand down her front.

“Not at all,” answered Josephine. Honest, even while she fussed with the sash. “Is it comfortable?” Fluffing and straightening. Never entirely satisfied with the drape.

“Yes, actually. It will take a bit of getting used to — the weight, and the way it moves — but that is no worse than the dress uniforms you’ve asked us to wear for formal events. And far less itchy. Although—” She skimmed her fingers up her sides and then splayed them across her chest, palms pressed to her breasts, as though they were exposed and she forced to cover herself to preserve her
modesty. “—The cleavage will take some getting used to. I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed quite so much of it. It’s almost obscene.”

A single, dark, brow quirked. The accompanying smile too wide, and held a little too long, to doubt there was a trace of innocence in her reply. “Perhaps we should seek a second opinion? Solas might be willing to offer his take on the matter.”

Ellana smirked. “And here I thought you intended nothing untoward.”

And then Josephine giggled. The delight in her own quip so unapologetically bright and honest that Ellana couldn’t help but be caught in the gravity of it, and joined her.

A hand came up to hide the mirth; only a little abashed by how easy it came. “I’m sorry,” Josephine said at length, though no real apology was needed for gifting them both a moment of laughter. “I hope you’ll permit me a few jests. I’ve said nothing for months, not even to Leliana. And truly, I am pleased that you’ve found someone to care for.”

The emphasis on the name implied it had caused significant hardship to still her tongue around the Spymaster, but it was stress of ‘months’ that piqued her curiosity more. “Did you truly know for that long?”

Quickly, “No,” she assured. Sensing that the real question was of their discretion. “I knew you two were close, but you’ve formed many such friendships in your time here, and show your affection easily. I only began to suspect that there might be something more between you after you fell ill.” As she spoke she pulled a few items from one of her pockets — a wide-toothed comb made of ivory and a black ribbon — then carefully gathered Ellana’s hair at her back. Separated it into several wefts and set to work properly styling it.

Never an easy task.

And one she momentarily lost herself to, until Ellana prompted her to continue with a curious, “Oh?”

Josephine hummed thoughtfully, picking at the curls. “There was an afternoon you were working with me in my office. He brought you a cup of tea when he returned to me a book he’d borrowed.”

“Was it the doting that tipped you off, then?”

Their eyes met in the mirror, and Josephine gave her a smile that was uncommonly wise. “It was the way he touched your wrist when he handed you the cup.” A twist of hair, along with the comb, were passed over her shoulder. Ellana took them dutifully, freeing both Josephine’s hands for finer work. She continued, “I’ve seen him pay similar kindness to others on many occasions. And while Solas has always been gracious, he also tends to be very reserved: I’d not witnessed him touch another person with the care he did then. If it was anyone else I wouldn’t have noticed, but for him it was… unusual. It suggested his interest in your health ran deeper than friendly concern. However, I wasn’t sure it was something you’d both acknowledged.” Her voice fell to a conspiratorial whisper for the next part. “Given the — ah, timing — I can assume it actually began earlier than that. I will admit I am curious just how much earlier it was.”

It was rare that she was offered a chance so tempting to ruffle the coiffed feathers of her diplomat. She quick to seize it. “Josie… are you asking me how long we’ve been sleeping together?”

She did not disappoint. Her eyes wide as saucers as she blustered a sharp, “No!” in protest. Looking equal parts chagrined and horrified. A pause and then, “No!” she said again, with slightly
less conviction. The moment of hesitation made Ellana’s brows raise. “I would never ask you something so personal. I meant in regards to how long you’ve been together. Not together, as in physically, but as a couple. Courting. Of course, relationships begin in many ways and I would not fault you if that were the case. You’re free to pursue who you desire in the manner you desire, it’s not my place to say anything about—”

Only then did she catch sight of the crooked smile in the mirror. It was an expression of victory as much as amusement.

She sighed and, “You’re teasing me,” she concluded. Weary, but not without a shade of good humour. “You are as bad as Leliana sometimes.” With a flair of mock offence she gestured for the twist of hair Ellana held aside, and upon being receiving it began working it into the braid she’d already finished. “Just for that I expect an answer.”

The strength of her conviction was endearing, and truthfully Ellana had no reason to guard those answers now. There was even an odd sort of thrill in being able to share them. Prior to telling her advisors the only other person who knew about the affair was Dorian, and the times they touched upon the topic were few and far between. Thus far limited to the occasional suggestive comment on the state of her hair, and his kind reassurance when their future together was not so clear.

‘When’ and ‘how long’ were the kinds of treasured details traded between friends over cups of wine. Shy smiles and quiet laughter in celebration of a love less complicated. The chance to indulge something as innocent as gossip was… unexpectedly freeing.

So she thought carefully upon the question, though technically unspoken, and wondered which advance between them counted as the first one. Not their first night, surely; that was more a reconciliation than an introduction. Neither was it their first kiss, which seemed at once too early and too late to count as a proper beginning. It was closer, though.

_The balcony_, she decided, when he admitted he’d fallen in love.

A strange start to a courtship — all backward and twisted in knots — though true to form. It was only once he’d spoken it aloud that he surrendered some of his heart, and they spent any real time together. Exchanged small intimacies while cuddled up together on her overstuffed furniture. Or a kiss shared in a darkened hall, far from prying eyes and in a location safe enough to ensure nothing more could follow. It had all been so frustratingly chaste, at first. Until the bite of an argument shattered the last of his resolve and he took her in his arms; allowed her to peel back the layers that protected his heart until he was truly bared beneath her.

It was startling to realize just how long ago that was.

“More than a year, I suppose,” she replied at long last. Then, on second thought. “Closer to two if I count what came before. Perhaps one and a half is more accurate.” Idly, she pulled at one of her fingernails, thinking on their early fights — some as passionate as their nights were later. Breaking apart only to come back together because they couldn’t quite make it stick. “There were a few months where we were _something_. Then something less. And then I’m not sure what we were for a while. It was nothing so formal, or even purposeful. It was…”

By accident, really — and never was there a truer word for what they were. All the way back to a first, careful, brush of his lips against hers in a clearing where they sparred on a cold morning. All she’d wanted was an easy victory to lord over his unearned confidence, and a chance to see him sweat, but instead she lit a fire. An encounter he’d not soon forget if their next foray into dreams was any indication.
Even before that, the converging of their hearts had always been more a clumsy tumble down a hill than a romantic waltz. Messy, with his vacillating between coy flirtation and attempts to keep her at arm’s length while she pined, alone, mistaking those advances he did make for playfulness instead of interest.

The thought made her laugh.

Out loud, before she’d fully realized and thought to stifle herself.

And then she was just embarrassed: once her laughter broke it occurred to her that the room had gone completely silent while she lost herself in thought… and had yet still failed to provide a proper answer.

Though the silence spoke it well enough, it seemed. Josephine eyed her with the kind of knowing look that suggested she knew exactly where her mind had wandered. “I see,” she said, and her gaze flicked between the mirror and her work on Ellana’s hair. Exuding a sense of quiet confidence, like she already knew all her secrets and the questions were merely for show — though it was more the satisfaction of gaining insight that pleased her.

“I don’t have a romantic dinner or a walk in the woods I could point to as a start,” Ellana said, quick to correct any assumption that had been made from her babbling. “He didn’t court me — if anything, he tried not to. It just sort of... happened. And once it had we did make an effort to be discrete. We were hardly unaware of the implications, were it to be made public.”

Josie gave her a full, wide, smile. An old favourite: endearing and almost child-like in its joy. Ellana loved those best. “An affair so driven it was neither stopped by the demands of war, nor the consideration of your station?”

“That is unbearably romantic,” she teased. “You make it sound like one of those terrible novels Cassandra enjoys.”

“I’ll look forward to reading Varric’s rendition, when this is all over.”

They laughed, and the good humour was liberating. Giggling like little girls as Josephine finished up the last touches of an elegant series of braids. Ornery curls tamed at her careful hands, with fewer snags than Ellana herself could manage. Once the ends were tucked back up under a twisted bun, signalling the end of the work, she turned her head from side to side to appraise it in the mirror. Smiling her approval.

But before she could say more Josephine exclaimed, “Oh!” and reached her belt. Patting at each of the pouches tied there. “I almost forgot!” Whatever she was searching for she quickly found, but before she could pull it out she paused — thought a moment — and instead prompted, “Close your eyes.”

The playful secrecy drew a skeptical raise of her brow, but Ellana did as she was bid. And a moment later she felt the touch of something small and cold against her breast — a pendant — and she resisted the urge to reach for it before Josie had given her permission. Once fastened at the back of her neck it was tugged at a few times to ensure its position was perfect before Josephine finally relented.

“Alright, go ahead.”

At first it appeared to be just a small, intricate, braid of silver. A simple, but beautiful, accessory made to match the edging of her gown. Ellana’s gratitude was sincere even before she looked...
closely enough to discern its real design. “Thank you, Josephine. This is lovely.” She took a step closer to the mirror to see it better, grasping it between a thumb and forefinger. “It’s a wonder—”

Then the detail caught her eye.

“Wait… is this—?”

No more than the size of her thumbnail — elegant, delicate, work that spoke to the jeweller’s talent and care for their craft — it was a pair of halla horns worked in delicate filigree, joined around a single embrium flower. The heraldry of clan Lavellan.

Tears pricked her eyes — “Oh, Josie,” — then fell upon flushed cheeks. Unashamed by how much the gesture had moved her.

While she anxiously rubbed a thumb across her knuckles, Josephine was all smiles for the reception. “I know the adjustment to life as the Inquisitor has not been a painless one,” she explained, “You handle it with such exceptional grace that it is easy to forget how far this position and its responsibilities have taken you from your home. Since your tattoos were removed I wasn’t sure of your feelings for your clan — though you have always spoken kindly of them, and they of you, when they write. Still, I thought you might appreciate the connection to them while you’re at the palace. I know it’s not the most comfortable event. Please, do not feel obligated to accept it if it causes you any grief. I would never want for you to—”

There was no need for any rationalization. Ellana would not tolerate even the barest hint of apology. Not for this. The dress bloomed as she spun and threw her arms around Josephine’s neck. Buried her head against her shoulder and pulled her into an embrace tighter than any she’d ever given.

And when she hugged her back, the tears felt freely.

“It’s perfect,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Once more a silence spoke volumes.

It was true: not in her wildest dreams had considered that one day her fate might deign to take her to a place so far, and so foreign. But neither had she thought she’d ever find herself so beloved. The genuine care her companions gave was enough to soothe any wounds the distance wrought. And more, those left on her weary heart so long ago, when she was nothing but a lonely youth with no true family to call her own.

While her spirit was shaped in the pine forests that raised her, love was more abundant here — in the empty mountains — than it ever had been there.

When she pulled back at long last, with her hands on Josephine’s shoulders for support, there was no denying the shine of tears in her eyes as well. “You’re welcome,” she said. And her voice only cracked a little before she was able to compose herself.

A smile, genuine, before she took a cleansing breath. And found a duty to attend to.

In that moment of intimacy they had pressed close enough that her opinion had changed about certain insights.

“But perhaps the neckline is a little low. I will have the shoulders shortened a little… just so you’re not quite at as much risk of falling out of it.
Translating:

In’nuis garahnen vun = Fuck! Burn everything/it all in the sun!
Tel’ha, y ajuathe = Unwise, but creative.
Ar’an’or, Elvhen. Thuast, bellanar atha em’an = We are the same, Elvhen. Though we are separated by many years.

Wanna read about the first kiss that was referenced? Check "Waltz"
The Game

Chapter Summary

For this chapter some passing knowledge of The Masked Empire helps (Reader's Digest version in the notes). Middle of this chapter is NSFW.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was cold.

Colder than she’d ever felt.

Colder than the world should be.

The sleeves of her dress didn’t quite reach her elbows, and the skirt not quite her knees. It made a poor cover; ripped and full of holes, scattered, where moths had eaten. Too much love wore the hem ragged months ago, and a hanging edge had caught a branch and tore when she scrambled into the bush. In its present state, it kept her no warmer than ribbons of scrap.

No matter how she tried she couldn’t pull it down far enough to cover her completely. What was left just wasn’t enough for her disappear inside the folds in search of warmth, and the collection of callouses and scars that littered her legs from reckless climbing did little to protect her either.

They should have — they were supposed to make her stronger.

Parts of her had already gone numb, while others ached with a pain so deep and terrible she thought she’d die to bear it… but had no choice. She’d long lost the ability to move. And even if she could, there was nowhere to go — she was lost and alone. This place would be her grave.

If thirst didn’t kill her by morning, exposure would take her first.

The knowledge gave her no fear; just the weight of solemn, tired, acceptance that settled over her like a heavy cloak. There was nothing for it now. She would join the bodies on the road before her, faces hidden under a scatter of hair. Frozen, caked in blood.

Once she saw a deer die of hunger. Nearly, anyway — it would’ve soon if she hadn’t found it first. Since the hard winter hit food had been so scarce that even the forest creatures couldn’t scavenge enough to sustain them. Starvation worked its way up the chain over a matter of weeks: starting with the typical cold-weather lull of farming and flora, to the birds in search of seed, beasts who ate their meat, and finally to people — until all they could do was make a meal for the earth. Hope their bodies nourished the next cycle so those who survived this time would not suffer their fate winter next.

Every day she worked her fingers raw digging up the frozen ground in search of roots and grubs. Every day she found little, if anything, for her effort. She wanted to help, but was still too small — and too weak — to go on the hunts. So she was left alone and instead accomplished nothing.

Useless.
Until she spied that deer.

It was laying behind a fallen log, near to where she’d been cutting into a pine tree for its inner bark. It was so weak and pitiful it could not even bear its own weight to flee at the sight of her knife when she brandished it. Instead only rolled its head to one side, as though baring its neck for sacrifice. Dark eyes dulled, it could not even muster the will to beg for its life.

Days, maybe weeks, it had wasted away before she found it. Slowly. Mournfully. A once-proud beast reduced to moaning through its last hours. Now nothing but taut skin pulled over sharp bones. It would barely make a meal — but it was still meat. When she brought her blade to its throat she could not bear to meet its eye. At the very least she could ensure the last memory anyone had of it would be of its bounty, rather than its pain.

When its last breath rattled in its throat she whispered a prayer to both Andruil and Ghilan’ain for their blessing. Meek though it was.

Meek.

Almost as much as she was now. Sitting in her thread-bare clothes — soiled and ragged — hoping death would claim her before she had to endure another long night.

At least the deer’s pitiful end served a purpose: it fed them for a night or two. But her? She’d die weary and forgotten; no flowers could take root in this frozen ground. Her body would nourish nothing. Thin bones carried off by wolves and her pretty dress in shreds, scattered to the winds.

Maybe she would have felt differently if she’d listened, and instead not worn it at all.

Maybe everything would have been different.

*It wouldn’t be so cold and her proper clothes would’ve added no extra weight to the pack to slow their progress and—*

She only picked it out of stubbornness, and vanity. It never kept her warm enough. Too special for travelling and she knew it. Yet she loved it too much to let it sit in the bottom of a bag. Worse, she didn’t even ask to wear it — she insisted. Begged and cried, even though she knew better.

It was the only fine thing she owned. When she wore it she felt pretty. It was a gift that outshined her freckles, her untamed hair, and even her knobby, skinny, limbs. One so fine it surely took months to pay for. That’s all that mattered to her when they left.

Three days ago was so long past — almost an eon. Soon, a lifetime.

Inquisitor?

The skirt flared when she twirled. Like a bell, or the tops of puffy white mushrooms. The ones she picked with mame. The ones she loved to eat cut into slices and fried in butter.

The next breath left her with a painful shudder.

Even the briefest imagining of food was enough to stoke the fire in her stomach. She shuddered, curled up and heavy with the weight of its emptiness. Bent helplessly over raised knees.

It’s cold.

She thought of the smoke rising from the frying pan and the way it smelled in the morning.
So, so cold. There is nothing here.

Now her hair was full of burrs. Face filthy, smeared with dirt and stained from tears.

The bite of frozen skin had taught her an important lesson; penance for her obstinance.

‘We’ll never win this argument. Let her go ahead; she’ll learn on her own when she gets cold. She won’t make the same mistake twice’.

Inqu—

I won’t. I promise. I’ll never wear it ever a—

“—isitor.”

It’s cold, and the shadows were closing in. She could feel their fingers at her throat, ready to choke the last breaths from her body. And she would let them. Despair was welcomed. Join the bodies on the road so they’d die as a f—

“Ellana!”

Only once her name was shouted did it manage to pierce the veil of sleep — a nightmare — and she was finally torn from it. It was a violent awakening. With a gasp she pitched forward, out of her seat, and in her shock nearly came out swinging. One fist already balled upon her thigh, ready to fight whatever had set her heart racing.

Breathing hard, uncomfortably cold, and briefly very confused, it took a moment for her senses to return to the point that she could remember where she was and how’d she’d got there.

She took quick stock of her surroundings. There were three faces pointed at hers — each wearing the same concerned expression. Silent, as they waited for her assurance that all was well.

All four shared a horse-drawn carriage with the curtains drawn. Cullen was at her side — and his hand hovering just above her elbow told her he’d been the one to wake her — while Vivienne and Solas were seated across. Worry tying them in rare agreement. She almost thought to ask them where they were before reality finally came crashing back.

They were travelling. Halamshiral — the gala. Everyone was dressed in their finest. She’d felt ill on the way, and Cullen suggested she try to sleep it off. They’d had hours to go and the pace was slow. The rhythmic rocking over uneven cobblestones set her head spinning.

Her last conscious thoughts had been of how deeply, vehemently, she hated carriage travel.

And maybe it wasn’t the bumpy ride that did it over the experience of being torn so violently from dreaming, but it seemed the suggestion of rest hadn’t worked as well as she’d hoped. She’d barely taken three breaths before a hot, familiar, prickle ran up the back of her neck. With it the knowledge that she wouldn’t even get the door open in time.

Fortunately, in the space between that terrible realization and the heave of her stomach, Solas had already acted. He grabbed a vase — the large, mostly-empty, container meant to hold the discarded rinds and unwanted pieces of the fruit they’d been provided for the journey — and leapt off his seat, thrusting it beneath her mouth with barely a second to spare before she doubled over it.
The Commander visibly recoiled as she grasped it from his hands. Averting his gaze to the window and lifting his fingers to his temple to shield his eyes while she coughed and retched. Though a hardened soldier, stoic and unshakable on even the bloodiest fields, there was something uniquely uncomfortable about being seated mere inches from someone getting sick into a ceramic pot. Somehow, this was worse.

“Excellent reflexes,” he muttered with a vague nod in Solas’ direction. Equal parts impressed and grateful for his uncanny speed. Their arrival at the palace was imminent and things would go much differently if the Inquisitor ruined her gown before they even made it to the gate. That would be a fate not even the finest magic could fix.

All things considered it was nothing short of miraculous that the nausea only culminated in a few dry heaves and an ugly coughing fit. Still, Ellana kept the vase held between her knees. Just in case.

Once the threat of sick had finally ebbed she rest her chin upon folded arms and breathed in deep. Sighing, slowly, on each exhale to calm her racing heart.

Vivienne took it upon herself to break the uncomfortable silence that had descended upon the party. “Alright now, my dear?”

Nodding, “Yes,” Ellana affirmed, but not so far from caution that she didn’t still cover her mouth with the back of a hand. The gesture also granted her a precious few seconds to stall for a suitable excuse. “I don’t think carriage travel agrees with me. Maybe sleeping was a bad idea.”

“Bad dreams?” prompted Cullen. He risked a glance in her direction. Eyeing the vase first to ensure she wasn’t still bent over it.

She was grateful for the suggestion, and would be sure to thank him later for it, as it lent weight to an otherwise thin excuse.


That part wasn’t a lie — the dreams had been distressing, she’d had more of them recently than ever before — but she was losing her grip on what remained to tell of the truth. The memory of had already faded into whispers.

“Sounds terrible.”

A twitch of his mouth betrayed the dry delivery, and she offered him a wry smile in return. She bore no love for fancy parties, or dresses — it was hardly a secret.

“Positively awful,” Ellana confirmed with a smirk. Smoothing a hand over her skirts for emphasis. “I cannot imagine anything worse than wearing a gown.”

“Travel has always given me loathsome dreams,” Vivienne interjected. Her eyes flicked between Ellana and the break in the curtains, watching the road. One hand folded demurely beneath her chin for balance. “Carriage rides may be comfortable but they are terribly boring, and what sleep that tedium gifts you tends to be rather colourful. Worse, if you’re sick for the trouble.”

Something outside caught her eye, and she paused to take a pair of gloves out of the small clutch on her lap. Pulled them on and buttoned the wrists. The carriage’s pace began to slow: they were nearing the gates.

“You get used to it in time.”
Ellana scoffed, dismissive. “My hope is not to do this often enough to build a tolerance.”

“Social obligations may not be your favourite way to spend an afternoon but it’s in your best interest to do more than endure them,” Vivienne replied, and though her tone was not as warm now there was no malice in the advice she offered — only harsh for the truth she spoke. It was the same tone of voice Ellana was accustomed to hearing from her advisors. The kind that brokered no argument. It even made the Commander sit up a little straighter.

“While droll, these events are a necessary part of any position of leadership. Beyond the opportunities for gathering allies and information, your mere presence brings import to your hosts and hope to their audiences. Do nothing but show up and you’ll still have done them a service. But you’re more than a chess piece, my dear: you’re a symbol. And the number of invitations you’ll be expected to respond to will only grow with your influence. You cannot avoid them all, though being selective in your replies builds sturdy bridges.

“The adjustment may be difficult, and with your heritage you’ll struggle more than most—” Beside her Solas turned, brow lowered, and looked ready to interject on her behalf until a quick glance stilled his tongue. The point of Dalish upbringing clashing with Orlesian expectations was a valid one. Neither intended, nor taken, as the insult he found it to be. “—but once you make the time you may find there are some aspects you find enjoyable about the events.

“It is a Game, darling,” and the snap of her clutch locking served as punctuation, “play it.”

Ellana could not argue the point, and was not so prideful that she meant to try. Instead, she offered the Enchanter a nod, conceding her the argument. The gesture pleased her. Painted lips curling into a fond smile that easily reached her eyes and, ah — there’s the love, she thought. Vivienne was firmest when she cared most, and softest when her advice was heeded.

A soft whoa from the carriage driver marked their arrival. The horses slowed to a canter. In a moment the door would open and they’d be led inside.

Ellana fumbled with the vase, suddenly feeling very self-conscious, unsure of what exactly to do with it lest she be presented while it was still caught between her knees. Though unsoiled by her sour stomach, somehow she still felt as though she’d violated its purpose.

Fortunately Solas came to her aid a second time. Standing, he extended a hand to take it back from her — but didn’t quite get that far. It didn’t occur to him to grab hold of the leather loop hanging by the door until after the carriage came to a sudden, lurching, halt and he was flung forward. Fortunate to catch himself on her leg before they collided and did any real damage to each other. A bloody nose before introductions wouldn’t do, either. They exchanged a pair of apologetic smiles before he righted himself, took the vase, and placed it back in the same corner he’d taken it from. This time making use of the strap, just in case.

Outside there was a parade of soft clicks as the high-heeled shoes of their driver and host hit the cobblestones, met with other servants of the palace, and arranged themselves. Then they opened the doors.

A young man in a colourful suit and a white mask bowed to the occupants. Threw an arm wide. “Your worship,” he greeted, “welcome back to Halamshiral.”

Behind him was a crowd of nobles, dignitaries, and other important people whose names she’d never remember. Many were gathered just outside the doors; lingering beyond their own introductions in the hope of catching a glimpse of the next guests. Pretending to talk, to look busy, lest they be accused of gawking. Others strode inside immediately upon arrival with the confident
air of one too good for gossip.

*It's all pageantry.*

Two dozen curious faces turned toward their carriage when the doors opened. All wearing masks of varying expense and detail, bobbing in the crowd like buoys at sea.

White for servants, unless they're polished. Colours for nobles. Metallics for import.

Ellana went over the list of families she’d studied, ticking them off her fingers one by one as she sighted their symbols, carved in brass and silver. Lions, deer, bears, bucks, rabbits and birds. It pleased her to know she was much better at it this year than last. Masks were easier to recall than faces. Chevaliers and guards were not difficult to pick out, as were bards. The Empress could be spotted a mile away with her glimmering dress and high-necked ruff standing tall above her head like a halo.

Telling the difference between the lesser nobles — the ones who didn’t have the standing to claim intricate designs associated with their families — was still a bit of a challenge.

Surely she’d have plenty of opportunities to commit them to memory with them all staring at her like that.

It was on that thought that she hesitated, finding herself suddenly unable to take the first step outside. Anxiety dropped a heavy weight, like lead, in her belly and she was paralyzed by the gravity of it. The burden of secrets, lies and presumption that would follow her wherever she went. All those faces reading her own.

Then a hand touched her arm. Gentle. “Shall we?” Cullen asked, then he tucked in his palm and offered her his elbow. The crooked smile told her he sensed her apprehension; likely even shared it.

So she breathed, deep, and took it with a smile that she hoped would substitute for nerve until she gathered it. “Indeed we shall. Lead on, Commander.”

Together they stepped out of the carriage and made their way to the main doors. Drawing fawning faces eager to see the picture they made of a leader in arm with her dapper escort, the head of her armed forces. Smiling and flirting with passers-by as though there was nothing bizarre about attending parties amidst a conflict.

You’ll get used to it in time.

Following their entrance the next cart in the convoy was opened and out stepped Cassandra, Iron Bull and Leliana. The officers travelling with them stayed behind, waiting their turn in the order of importance.

Back in the carriage Solas waited *not* to be prompted to leave. As an elf he’d take up the rear of the party — forgotten and unnoticed. Fortunate. It left him free to slip through the palace as an observer and do what he willed with his time.

Only once the Commander and the Inquisitor were inside, and the warriors almost through the entrance, did the young man at the carriage door gesture for the next group to exit. Sure to give them time for an appropriate spectacle. When Vivienne made to leave Solas politely offered her his arm to aid her exit from their transport. It was no surprise that she refused.

It was a surprise, however, that she chose to take the moment to offer him some advice. Stalling,
under the guise of donning her mask.

“‘You should mind the way you show familiarity to the Inquisitor,’” she warned.

Unexpected, he’d admit.

But there was no reason to believe it was anything more than a comment on the tone of conversation they’d exchanged on the way, so he feigned ignorance. “Far be it from me to speak out of turn,” he said, and followed it with a barb: “I forget that you do not expect the same from the Elves you kept at court. Were they all delegated to duties that kept them from offending your sight?”

Her laughter was cold, with just enough of an edge to bite. And the way she pressed her fingers to her lips was a gesture meant to emphasize that mirth rather than hide it. “You misunderstand me, Solas. It isn’t your words that concern me as much as your habits. An Elven apostate ingratiated into her inner circle may only raise a few brows in the Inquisition, but in Orlais they will be searching for a reason why. ‘Expert on the Fade’ holds little meaning here, and though you play the Game well for someone without a mask your hand on her thigh speaks of a position in her council more intimate than the title would imply.”

Dryly, he replied, “I shall endeavour not to trip in her presence lest a sordid fiction be writ of where I fell.”

“It was not the fall but catching yourself, my dear, and that she was so accustomed to the touch that she did not take notice of your trespass.”

“Nor is she likely to: she is Dalish,” he countered easily. “Her people are easier with their affection, and accustomed to sharing close-quarters.”

It was not a lie: she often talked with her touch. A hand laid carelessly on his shoulder or knee was startling before he grew accustomed to it. A habit born in any small, familial, community like the clans where space and privacy were luxuries few enjoyed.

It was not a lie, but near enough to one that it might not please her to hear it, were she present. And it failed to pass Vivienne’s scrutiny. “Please,” she admonished, and finished fastening her mask. The look she gave him from beneath it served as warning not to belabour the point — she had no patience for this dance. Not with him. “Orlesian court are not so blind as peasants and soldiers: a display so careless would set tongues wagging.”

“I’m surprised I’ve not yet heard tale of her numerous affairs if it takes only a stumble to invent one.”

This time her laughter was genuine. “You cannot possibly be that naive, Solas. Rumour and supposition always follow power; a hundred lies are told of leaders every day. An interesting fiction they’ll trade for free — but a secret they will kill for.”

She stepped down from the carriage floor unaided. All smiles and grace as she greeted the servants that waited by the doors to introduce her. Offering a final warning over her shoulder, “Try not to give them any knives.”

Another five minutes passed before the driver prompted Solas to follow. The entire delegation had arrived and been introduced by then. Even the soldiers were given the privilege before him. Though the order bore him no trouble: now more than ever he was grateful for the invisibility his appearance gifted him.
The Enchanter’s lecture had gotten under his skin. It wasn’t just the satisfaction she wore so plainly in having painted him into a corner, where any rebuttal he offered would be mistaken for a poor defence. More than that, her tone set his teeth on edge: she spoke to him as though he were a wayward child she was scolding about forgotten manners. It stirred a part of him he’d not felt in a long time. Some rebellious, youthful, and entirely inappropriate impulse to test her rather than take the advice to heart... if only to remind himself that he had far more experience manipulating a court than she could ever hope to attain in her limited, human, life in the Circle.

The evening would never end.

There would be no lull in the gaiety, the musicians would never stop playing, leaving all the guests trapped in an endless waltz like charmed beasts. Lulled into a stupor by vengeful spirits bent on watching them dance to death on the bones of her ancestors.

A honeyed trap for all who dared to toast upon this sacred ground.

...Or something like that.

They’d arrived sometime mid-afternoon and though it had reasonably only been dark a few hours surely an entire day had already passed in that time.

Perhaps two.

It was impossible to tell when the hours blurred into an endless tedium of flowing skirts and high laughter, faked behind folded wrists and polished masks. Guests fawning over cake and wine, the baubles on shoes — *did you see her pearls?* — and the interesting hats worn by families of import. Whatever accident of fashion was sure to inspire next year’s trends. It was all so terribly, terribly droll.

But it wasn’t initially. At first her presence was a curiosity — a delight, even! The Inquisitor, *here*, and not even on business. Mingling among the people after a long isolation in that cold and lonely tower on the border of their lands. What a mystery she’d proved to be! How timely that she’d finally *graced* them. She’d been on the receiving end of far more passive aggressive, hemming, questions than she’d ever thought possible.

Amusingly, Skyhold was even more of a puzzle to them. If it wasn’t rumoured to be her grave it was a too-convenient watch post, a clever advantage, or a hard-won prize. A fascinating narrative had been built to answer the question of how she acquired the fortress, as knowledge had begun to spread about its importance as a defensive position.

‘I stumbled upon it’ simply wasn’t good enough to travel, apparently.

My Elvhen paramour gifted us his ancient station to save us all from freezing to death in the mountains, would probably play better.

All told, it was a little alarming how many people knew nothing of Skyhold. The holdings had
been theirs for well over a year, with repairs nearly completed, yet no one she’d spoken with had actually seen it. Most didn’t even realize it was a proper castle at all and instead seemed to think it was a palatial city in the clouds, shrouded in mystery. Home of spirits and ghosts alike.

And really, there was no reason to correct their assumptions.

Following Josephine’s advice, only the most pertinent questions were answered.

No, I did not disappear; rumours of my death were highly exaggerated. We are well-stocked and supplied for the winter and receive visitors year round. We also host guests of honour regularly. There are merchants… and even a tavern! We have a battalion of veteran soldiers protecting us. Make the climb sometime and see us. You probably won’t die on the way. Bring a coat and good shoes.

Once she had a chance to be passed between several ballrooms the novelty finally began to wear off and she was awarded the opportunity to lean against a wall and catch her breath between introductions. Actually enjoy some of the food.

She lingered in the dining hall longer than she meant to: a few new, curious, dishes required additional investigation. At one table sat an ornate bowl filled with a medley of forest-grown vegetables, nuts and mushrooms — steamed — that absolutely nobody was eating from. On a plate next to it a stack of simple, flattened, cakes dusted with powdered sugar that had the distinctly earthen smell of a dish made with Halla butter.

Curious.

A careful taste confirmed it: these were Dalish foods. Or an Orlesian kitchen’s best approximation, anyway.

Two explanations were possible: either they were made specifically with her palate in mind, or her position had inspired enough shallow intrigue into her culture to borrow and bastardize a few recipes for the exotic appeal. Another bite and, the second, she decided. Significant effort was required to swallow the taste of their cloyingly sweet version of a hearth cake.

Truly, this was Orlais’ finest legacy: fucking up all things Elven.

Beyond that initial rush the evening dragged on with little fanfare — she quickly grew bored. The hours past sunset net her only a scatter of polite smiles and shallow conversation. Each new face counted by a glass of summer wine she’d graciously accepted, sipped once, and then traded off with a mostly-empty flute Cullen carried past her. She’d lost count of how many they’d exchanged this way, but if the rosy flush of his cheeks were any indication it would’ve been well enough to leave her hurting in the morning if she’d imbibed instead.

If she gave him any more he’d need a chaperone of his own.

For that freedom she envied him.

Not for the drunkenness, though that would be nice to offset the boredom, but for the lack of constraints. No one would begrudge him stumbling, flirting, or laughing too loud.

Sometime after the fifth glass she lost sight of him, though she imagined he wouldn’t wander far. Part of his duty that night had been to keep an eye on her; he’d not retire until after she did. Leliana would ensure it.

The rest of the party were spread evenly throughout the palace. Vivienne, gratefully, stayed nearby
for the first few hours — the Enchanter did well to intercept the flow of well-wishers and ensure she wasn’t overwhelmed by the crowd upon arrival. Allow only the most important to have a proper audience. Leliana checked in two or three times. Cassandra and Bull she spied in the halls between ballrooms while trying to make her way into the dining hall. Each gave her a friendly nod, but did not leave the posts they’d chosen.

She didn’t see Solas once until much later. He was exceptionally good at staying hidden when he meant to, and it was only once she was actively searching that she finally found him. Unguarded and alone, leaning against a window in the shadow of some curtains with his eyes on her. He wore an expression she could recognize even across the room. Confident. Amused. Waiting for her to realize she was being watched.

For his blatant indiscretion she envied him, too.

Had she the opportunity she’d do the same: he looked dashing. Smoulder and smile. Last time they were here she wasn’t privy to all his secrets, and so could only wonder at what strange history granted him the ability to be so comfortable at court. Now she could see it for what it was: rebellious nobility at play in his natural environment. While status had never done much for her before, there was something about the taboo of Elvhen gentry that was… oddly alluring.

But lingering too long on the sight would be suspect, so she let her gaze pass over him instead. Following the ebb and flow of dancers moving through the room in pairs. And when she looked again he was gone. Briefly she wondered if she’d just imagined him, but then he emerged from the crowd — already half-way to meet her.

Not so subtle. He knew full well how to leverage his inconspicuousness to play to her interest.

Bastard, she thought wryly.

Solas’ steps were as graceful as they were quiet; having foregone the hard-heeled shoes of the mens’ dress uniforms in favour of a leather pair, he could easily pass without notice. Skirting shadows cast by tall windows and hung tapestries. Artfully evading the crowd. An old, practiced, dance. It was fascinating to watch him move. Like a fox on the hunt.

Between the fingers of one hand he carried two flutes of wine. Paler than the fragrant, fruity blend she’d been offered all evening. He stopped two paces before her and with a flick of his wrist unfolded a scrap of cloth in his free hand that she recognized as a kerchief embroidered with the Inquisition’s sigil. Tucking it against his palm, he used it to delicately grasp one of the crystal stems and offer it to her.

A small, supplicating, gesture practiced by the palace’s servants. Lest they leave fingerprints on the glassware reserved for nobles and dignitaries.

She wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about the pantomime — she was hardly high society — though clever, she’d admit, for the sake of keeping up appearances. More interesting was how quickly he’d chosen, and slid into, the role of lowly subordinate. In a matter of hours he’d effortlessly adopted the mannerisms of the staff, lending more credence to the title of ‘serving man’ over the loftier, ‘Fade Expert’.

So, “Thank you,” she said, and brought the glass to her lips to feign a sip.

The smell was much milder, almost as though—

“It is mostly water,” supplied Solas before she could ask. Then tucked the kerchief back into the
pocket of his dress coat and slid behind her, leaning a hip against the stone column she’d been resting upon so he faced her back as she faced the room. A careful choice. Hidden, but not so far that they couldn’t converse at a low volume. And not so close that it would be too familiar.

Close enough to be coy, if they were not looking at each other, and she did not spare the opportunity.

She teased, “Is it so wise to be caught staring?”

“Wisdom is often absent in the face of such beauty,” he countered. Smooth. It was more charming than she’d like to admit. “But I doubt my attention would be noticed: much as the last time you visited the palace you have drawn many eyes this evening. Were you so inclined, you could have your choice of lovers.”

*Is that what this is about?*

She hid her laugh in a sip of watered wine. “Fortunate for you, I am not so inclined.”

The silver buckles on his belt made a soft sound as they slid along the marble. And the next words he spoke were little nearer than the last. “*Fortune for me.*”

There was a promise laid in the timbre of his voice that made her pulse leap. A low, flirtatious tone he was usually very careful with; reserved for games they played in hushed voices when privacy was not assured. Suddenly she understood why he’d waited until she settled in this corner before he’d made an appearance.

And she’d been *terribly* bored before he walked up.

The next move was hers. Advance and parry. “Tell me, have you heard many salacious rumours while hiding in the shadows?”

“Plenty,” he replied. “You’d be surprised how little care is paid to what is said around the servants, or those taken for one.”

“For example?” prompted Ellana.

Another shift of fabric, buttons clinking, as he stood a little straighter to better scan the room. Half a moment passed in quiet contemplation before he found a suitable subject for the challenge.

“The woman in the lavender gown and the extravagant hat. To your far left.”

It was hard to miss her. With all the feathers she’d tucked into the band she could be mistaken for a bird that flew in through an open window. Ellana recognized the sleek, rounded, chin of the mask she wore beneath it. Rare, as most masks only covered the upper half of the face. That design was on one of the lists she’d studied.

“De Bonne?”

“Mm,” Solas confirmed as he sipped from his glass. “She is having an affair with the same woman as her husband. Though neither are aware of the other. Their shared, and much younger, paramour intends to gain enough influence from the boudoir to have their wealth willed to her when they pass.”

That *did* raise her eyebrows — “Truly?” — and at his affirmative hum, added, “Good for her.”
The quip rewarded her with a startled snort of laughter, then a cough to cover it.

“Give me another.”

This was a far better way to pass the time.

It took him half the time to find a second example. “The man with the gold mask, standing by the marble bust across the room. Third window from the right—” He waited for her to nod before continuing. “—he considers himself a particularly enchanting suitor, and a master of romance. ’A purveyor of fine fruits’ I believe is what he called it.”

“Colourful.”

“Indeed. He intends to charm your Spymaster.”

She chuckled. “Oh, I wish him the best of luck with that.”

“As do I. He’ll need it if he intends to survive beyond introductions. Though I admit it the spectacle of his attempt would be entertaining, should we be privileged to witness it.”

There was a high laugh from across the room that drew her attention. A woman in a large, ruffled, skirt was entertaining a circle of men. The ungloved hand she laid upon one’s shoulder spoke of her intention to single him out of her audience. Rather than a mask she wore only a band of black lace to cover her eyes. Uncommonly exposed for Orlais. Streaks of silver in her elaborate braid put her at middle age, though her face held little evidence of it save for the lines at the corners of her eyes.

The sway of her hips and the surety of her smile made her an interesting target. So, “what about her?” Ellana tested, gesturing with her chin. “She’s rather striking.”

“Ah, the Lady Mercier?” he supplied. Too quick. He might be cheating. “A dangerous choice. Her husband died of a sudden illness some years ago, and she has yet to find another. Interestingly, two of her previous lovers also fell victim to it. I suspect the man she has her eye on this evening may find himself in a similar state.”

A black widow. She smirked. At her age, money was surely the motivator. “Is it their lordly assets that attract her interest?”

“And their wealth, as well.”

That was enough to make her toss a glance over her shoulder. Surprised to find him intimately close now, leaning his back upon the column just behind her with his arms loosely folded. Now-empty glass dangling from his fingers. He made a tempting picture with his easy posture, the bottom two buttons of his coat undone and a dusky shade in his cheeks from the drink.

She gave him an appraising look, lingering on the plush of his bottom lip, and the tick in his brow said he took note of her interest. “Now you’re making things up.”

“I appreciate the compliment,” he said, and laughed. “But I’m no dramatist. Only Varric could craft a story so interesting.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re an excellent liar.” It was dry, but not without humour.

But the dig failed to give him the shake she’d intended — wine had made him cocky — and when she turned back to the ballroom he moved with her. One half-step forward to close the last inches between them so that his hand would brush the back of her hip, stilling her. Lips at her ear. He held
her there just long enough to impart a quiet, “Not with you,” then slid back into her shadow.

While she had some suspicion of his aim when he first approached, now she was sure: she was being seduced.

Dangerous choices, a distant part of her warned, and recalled all the careful warnings her diplomat had given her before she left for this event. Appearance, posturing and conversation. Don’t refuse a glass of wine nor food too rich. Do not laugh too loud, nor act too cold. Be friendly, but do not dance close. Draw no unnecessary attention.

All sound advice.

But she’d said nothing about flirtation specifically.

And in that glaring oversight Ellana found herself ensnared. The temptation of a small, private, rebellion proved too much. Now all she could think about were how many witnesses stood between them and the down-soft bed in the guest quarters she was shown upon arrival. Too many. There was no way to discreetly bring a companion to her bedchamber while dozens of people were on the floor. Surely someone would be watching that door for just such an error.

That wouldn’t stop her from indulging in a little coquetry. That was harmless.

“All these secrets about sex?”

He chuckled softly. Low. “No, some are far worse.”

It felt like a trap but she still took the bait. Asked, lightly, to highlight the irony: “What could possibly be worse than tactical seduction and secret affairs?”

He paused long enough that she nearly asked the question twice, but then his hand was on her elbow — a touch hidden in shadow — running a finger along the underside of her arm. Slowly. Taking his time to draw a line along sensitive skin. Sliding to her wrist where his thumb and forefinger could take hold and sharply point her hand toward the right side of the room. “There.”

A dozen men and women stood in the direction he’d indicated. Any of them a fair candidate. Between hats and masks and wire-framed skirts they were all equally flamboyant. Birds of paradise in a roving, chattering flock.

She made a guess: the lone dull colour amidst a circle of brighter ones. “The grey gown?”

Solas slid close enough behind her that she could almost feel him nodding. “A tragedy,” he whispered. So close she could feel his breath upon her neck. Nose against her ear. “Not three days past.”

“What happened?” She held her breath.

In a low, inviting voice he answered.

“Her cat went missing.”

Laughter came so sudden, so unexpectedly bright, that she utterly failed to stifle it.

Fortunate that he’d anticipated her and already stepped away before any eyes were drawn to the sound. Ensuring more than enough space stood between them to imply a respectful distance. His expression a picture of innocence with a soft smile. Amused by her good humour, and nothing
Once she caught her breath, and the only guests who’d taken notice of her impropriety had wandered away, she hid her lingering grin behind a raised glass. Bottom lip tucked playfully between her teeth. In this place of stifling rules and decorum, where offence could be paid for something so simple as taking too much food on your plate, his attempts to make her laugh out loud were as effective as the smoothest proposition when it came to setting her heart alight.

It was bold, and intimate, and terribly attractive.

“If you keep flirting with me, I may have to find a darkened corner to drag you into.”

His reply was immediate: “What makes you think I have not found one already?”

That answer was wholly unexpected. He was rarely so brazen with his pursuit. Coy cat and mouse in crowded rooms was a titillating way start to an evening, and was a game they’d played before to build tension, but when it came to resolving it he remained discreet. They would always wait until the end of the night. The teasing was fun, of course, but he never pushed it so far that there was a real risk in it.

Here, in The Winter Palace with rumour surrounding absent months and two layers of pleated skirts to hide the cause, the risk could not possibly be higher.

Tempting.

Her eyes flicked toward the exit at the end of the room, the one opposite the guest quarters that led further into the palace. It was unguarded. “That,” she warned, “is a dangerous bluff.”

“I was not bluffing.”

The resolution in his voice severed the last thread maintaining her casual façade, and she shifted, turning, to look him in the eye — measure the weight of his conviction for herself. Something he anticipated, it seemed, as he was just quick to catch her by the arm and hold her body in place before she managed anything beyond a curious tilt of her chin.

Pinned, “Solas,” she whispered instead. “Are you drunk?” Just in case this was a line he’d regret crossing, come morning.

A throaty chuckle and, “No,” he answered.

Before she could manage another question he pushed off the column and slipped past her, leaving the relative seclusion of the corner they’d occupied. The hand on her arm twisted so he could touch his fingers to bare skin exposed by the billow of her sleeve, and run them once more from elbow to wrist as he passed. A single nail catching on her downturned palm.

For a moment their eyes locked and the heat in them was unmistakable.

“The art in the upper library is lovely,” he was saying, gaze lowering to indulge in the view offered by the cut of her dress. There was no misreading his intent. “It is a shame no one is ever present to appreciate it.”

And with that he turned, clasped his hands behind his back, and exited the ballroom. Leaving Ellana alone with the invitation.

The thumping beat of her heart in her ears made it difficult to give it the consideration it was due.
Ultimately she found she could not gather enough sense to weigh reason against desire, and overpower the lure of doing something wholly and completely unadvisable.

The hundred heartbeats she waited before she followed were quite possibly the longest of her life.

The small room at the back of the library’s upper wing may once have been a functional office. A decade ago, perhaps. Now the collection of old chests, books, and dusty paintings told only of its neglect. It had been years since it was used as anything other than storage — likely near as long since anyone graced it with their presence. The room went unappreciated for so long that knowledge of its very existence had faded; doomed to be forgotten among the dozens of others in the palace just like it.

As it happened, when next the door burst open to admit the stumbling, clumsy, tangle of limbs that had rediscovered it, the pair had little care for its history.

It was less a dance and more of a mad dash. A backward push across the room, with one of Ellana’s hands gripping Solas’ collar while the other blindly groped behind her. She’d glimpsed an old oak table in the back corner of the room when it was briefly illuminated by the ray of light spilling in from the hall. She had only a second to register its position before she was spun round, thrown against the door to close it, and plunged into near darkness.

One — two — eight stumbling steps and her fingers found purchase on the edge. She heaved herself atop it, pushing aside several stacks of books to make room for their bodies. The tomes fell to the floor with a series of muffled thumps, releasing a cloud of dust that neither could bother to notice. Too occupied with each other — lips and teeth and frantic kisses — as they wordlessly set to work on buckles, buttons and sashes. Losing only the clothing that was required to come off and moving aside the rest.

Her smalls were already hanging off an ankle and her heeled shoes on the floor by his belt and pouch by the time Solas thought to point two fingers at the door and draw a pattern in the air. Cast the faint outline of a warding glyph that flickered upon the surface of the old wood not quite long enough to seal it. A pithy attempt at security he tried three times before her hand found its way down the front of his unbuttoned trousers. The firm grip of her fingers closing around his length sent a thrilling heat through him that culminated in an accidental burst of flame from his open palm. The spell stopped just short of scorching the wall and he felt, rather than saw, the triumphant grin Ellana flashed him as she caught his lip between her teeth.

He gave up on sealing the door.

Then it was her turn to lose herself to sensation. Shuddering, as his hands slid along the inside of her thighs, navigating beneath the layers of her dress hitched around her waist to find the heat of her core. Clever fingers made a study of slick flesh, coaxing her apart just enough to push inside, and found her wanting.

When she moaned aloud, he shushed her. Lips against her ear whispering a warning she would struggle to heed: “You must be silent, or someone might come looking.” Nodding, she tucked her face into his neck to muffle any further cries she teased from her.
He pressed the meat of his palm against her centre, working in tandem with the thrust of his fingers to create a tight grip she could rock into. Move with him. Build a rhythm that he matched with his own hips grinding wantonly into the barrel of her hand. Unable to stop himself from chasing the relief she offered, even if it meant his endurance would suffer for his selfishness. This was not an encounter made for lazy strokes and long kisses. They had mere minutes.

He vowed to make up for it later.

It took only a moment spent at play until her body began to tighten, slick pooling at the base of his fingers, and she breathed an urgent, “Please,” across his lips. This was good, so good, but she wanted it better.

With the desperation so evident in her voice he couldn’t have refused her if he tried.

She hooked one leg over his elbow and wrapped an arm around his neck to steady herself. Keep him near enough to still reach his mouth to kiss as he lowered her down for a better angle.

The slow, aching, push inside was near enough to make his knees weak. A moment was spared simply to enjoy the feel of her, tight and hot, and he so deep within that it could not be said where she ended and he began. Take a long, slow, breath to centre himself so this would not end too soon. Allowing her to work him up was, perhaps, a mistake made in eagerness… but he could not bring himself to regret it now.

The first rock of his hips drew a deep groan that he didn’t even think to stifle.

Her breath caught, but, “You must be silent,” she teased. Parroting his warning back to him in a whisper.

They laughed, softly. Together. Before he dragged his mouth along the column of her throat to her shoulder and confessed: “I have been thinking of this for hours”. Then inhaled, deep, the sweet scent of her skin and began to move in time with her breaths.

A monumental effort was made to pace himself but the task proved impossible. Each attempt to slow them down was met with a roll of her hips — and a quick squeeze of her one leg wrapped around his back — to draw him further in. Urge him to pick up the rhythm. Soon, all hope of a lasting encounter was lost. Tender lovemaking this was not. Rather a desperate, hard, chase toward release they craved too terribly to go without even for one more hour.

Ellana felt his need laid bare in the careless way he wound his fingers into her hair; an attempt to cradle her neck gone awry once he was driven to distraction by the movement of her body. Nails catching in the knots teased into her curls by Vivienne’s careful hand just a few hours earlier. She could spare only a second of consideration for the Enchanter’s wasted work before the pleasant tingling of her scalp chased it away.

His breath came hard and hot upon her lips, brushed across her cheeks, against the shell of her ear as gave up on kissing her and instead turned his face into the crook of her neck. Teeth upon her jaw. She could feel the coils of muscle in his arms tighten around her as the steady rock of his hips began to stutter. The little gasps of breath beginning to colour with the choked sounds that heralded his end. Too close, too soon; though she had no concern for time spent when she was cresting with him.

Between the planning and the preparations, the travel and the introductions, they’d had precious little time together — to say nothing for time spent alone.
The event was stifling. Decorum restricting. Even the beautiful dress held her too tight.

But this?

This was freeing.

This was a private rebellion… just for the two of them.

And so, “Don’t slow down,” she plead, when his rhythm began to falter. Shallower thrusts replacing deeper ones as he fought for time to bring her pleasure before he reached his own.

The thin rasp of his voice at her ear when he tried to speak made her stomach twist in knots. He didn’t heed her order. Instead swallowed hard and gave a small, subtle, shake of his head. Managed only the barest protest of, “I can’t—” before she cut him off.

“Then don’t.”

An order she sealed with a searing kiss. Drawing out a series of high, soft, sounds that spoke to the effort he made at staving off his end… unravelling. It was enough to make her stomach swoop, and that pool of tension push her past the point of no return.

It was only once her hips lifted, back bowing as she rose toward her climax, that the last threads of Solas’ careful control snapped. The hand on her neck slipped, came down hard upon the desk, fingers searching for an edge to steady himself as his knees gave out. The other held fast to her hip beneath her skirts, so tight she could feel the prick of his nails.

He came half a moment before her with a string of broken Elvish whispered so fast, so breathless, that she didn’t catch a single word of it. And when she followed she pressed the sounds of her pleasure into the padded shoulder of the dress shirt he never did manage to get out of.

When the last of the aftershocks had subsided they slowed — stilled — and rest their foreheads together. Breathless, awash in the gauzy glow of relief. Giddy at their own impatience.

For a while they said nothing.

Simply enjoying the last minutes they had together ensconced in this forgotten room for a tryst.

Ellana broke the silence first. Running a hand up his neck to cradle his head in her palm, she whispered softly, “If we ruined this dress Josephine will have me killed.”

In reply, Solas only chuckled.

It seemed that only a moment passed in that comfortable space before somewhere in the distance the band changed tunes. A waltz.

There was a chime. Then a cheerful sound erupted from the crowd in the East hall, below them, followed by the movement of several dozen making their way to the main ballroom to enjoy the last round of dances before the revelry was called for the evening. Her absence would be noted soon, and they wouldn’t find a better opportunity to slip back into the crowd.

Solas had the same thought. “We should return,” he said. Tucked a weft of hair, now looser than before, behind her ear. He lingered to run a finger along its edge, smiling when she hummed an approving sound.

She could not resist one more opportunity to be coy. “Lest someone think I have run away with a
“Perish the thought,” he murmured in return. Urged her chin to one side with a gentle push of his nose. Baring flushed skin to the feather-light caress of his lips so he might leave a trail of kisses along her jaw.

Smiling, Ellana tilted her head back to invite a kiss upon her throat. An act he indulged in without hesitation. She said, “I would love for you to join me in my room this evening.”

His answer was breathed across her neck. “Somehow I do not think it would endear you to Josephine after all the effort put into protecting the image of your chastity.”

A snort. “And yet here we are,” she replied pointedly, “fucking in a storeroom.”

That won her a proper laugh. “Merely a few stolen moments; an entire night spent in each other’s company is a different matter.”

“That perhaps you could find a way to steal a few more before the morning comes?”

A moment, as he feigned consideration. Then, “I could hardly refuse such a tempting offer,” Solas replied, and stole another long, slow kiss. Indulgent and greedy in this private space. A final embrace before they parted for a promise of later. “But for now, your public awaits. I fear we have dallied enough already.”

Solas left her half-seated on the desk with her skirts bunched around her waist, toes not quite touching the ground, and retrieved what little clothes they’d discarded on the floor. Shoes, bloomers, belt, sash. He pulled something from one of the coat pockets — the kerchief — and handed it to her along with her small clothes.

When he’d used it earlier she’d thought it an odd accessory for him to carry — now she understood why he’d chosen it. She took them both, grinning. “Such a gentleman to be so prepared.” She narrowed her eyes, “…Did you plan this?”

His gaze flicked toward her as he buttoned his shirt, a guilty smile playing at his lips. “It was a possibility I considered.”

“Perhaps less a gentleman and more a scoundrel.”

Solas gave her a look but said no more.

Ellana waited until he was done dressing and had begun to help her fix her hair before prompting, “What was it you said?”

He raised a brow. Tucked a loose curl back into the curled bun and smoothed it over with a palm. “Regarding?”

“What you said in Elvish. To me. At the end.”

There was a near-imperceptible twist of his mouth before he replied. A guilty, sheepish smile. “I do not recall,” he replied, as his eyes bounced between her and the floor. Then to his fingers as he straightened his collar.

Easy tells when he was too exposed to hide them better.

“Liar,” she accused, though it was hardly an insult when he’d done such a poor job at it. “Say it
again in Common.”

In the brief silence that followed she could swear, even in the dark, that she saw his cheeks colour a shade deeper beyond the pink flush of exertion.

“It was, ‘your body is a wonder, and I lose myself to it’.”

That was an even worse attempt.

“That is not what you said.”

A soft, breathy laugh — and he dropped the pretence of ignorance. She saw it in his eyes, too, when he met hers again. Tugging at the cuff of his jacket to fasten the final button. “No,” he admitted. “That was considerably more polite.”

When the dancing was done and the first wave of guests retired to their rooms — leaving only the drunk and debaucherous behind on the floor to titter their stories of conquest and status — he went to her room.

Patience awarded to him by their earlier encounter meant it was hardly an effort to take the time to find a discreet path. Navigating the corridors with the quiet confidence of one accustomed to moving through shadows. His sureness was earned: eons of espionage had taught him well the skills required to pull off something as simple as a midnight tryst in a grand palace.

First he crafted an alibi: ensuring he was witnessed leaving the main floor long after the Inquisitor had been escorted to her room, and in a direction opposite the guest wing. Toward the servant’s quarters where he’d been ‘accidentally’ stationed. A gesture surely meant to pay him insult for his inclusion in the Inquisition’s envoy. But it caused him no real hardship, so he had no complaints.

He carried wine in a curled, long-stemmed, glass. An item pilfered from one of the head tables in the ballroom; different from the standard fare. The design drew stares and a few whispers from the servants as he passed. The sheer audacity of an attendant drinking from the pieces reserved for nobility was a memorable sight. Anyone else would surely be punished for the insolence but the protections awarded to him by his association with the Inquisition, that same ones that kept him from being thrown in chains with the other apostates, also assured no harm would come for testing the limits of Orlesian convention.

He stumbled, swaying when he caught himself — to sell the story — then smiled at a young Elven maid who flashed him a grin as she watched the show. Delighted by this small act of defiance. Even if his imagined bravery was only caused by an indulgence of drink. The seed was sown: when those who bore witness to the performance returned to their tasks they’d bring with them the tale of the flushed apostate who forgot his station and showed up those who’d spent the evening looking down upon him. A small, achievable, rebellion that might inspire others to do the same when circumstances allowed it.

No piece was moved without considering the board.
The curious girl left to fetch water for someone’s bath before he made it all the way to his room, and so never saw him double back in the direction he came. Sober and sure, now — no more swagger in his step.

It took him fifteen minutes to find his way back across the palace and tap twice upon the Inquisitor’s door. A signature knock used only when he came to her in secret.

In another ten the last layer of her gown was dropped upon the floor.

Thirty, until he’d breathed her name across her cheek a final, urgent, time and they lay entwined in the sheets.

Twenty more to enjoy the lazy glow that followed. Drawing nonsense shapes and lines across her shoulders with his fingertips while her head rest comfortably upon his chest. Heart beat beneath her ear, and the swell of her middle tucked against his hip. The steady rise and fall of his breath soon rocked her to sleep… and it was only a few moments more before he slid out of her arms. Pulled the blanket around her shoulders. Dressed, kissed her cheek, and left.

He slipped, unseen, from the guest-of-honour quarters. Entering the hall only once he was assured it was as empty as expected. Any staff normally assigned to this side of the palace would be working the main floors, and would likely remain there for some time.

Though the ball had wound down over the last few hours it was far from over. Gatherings such as these tended to go on for several days — hosting several talks, events and entertaining displays — working the servants to such extremes that it was not uncommon to find an elf, exhausted, propped up against the wall in a darkened corner. As a rule the party-goers tended to ignore them this time of night, and so they were gifted an hour or two of precious rest before returning to their duties.

As Solas passed the rooms assigned to other members of the Inquisition, he noted — with some amusement — that each included a small vase hung on the doorframe. A bouquet of white flowers tucked inside. A lovely detail, but less for beauty and more for the message it imparted. The symbolic kind: passed between staff to warn them not to disturb the occupants until they left their beds on their own accord. Guests who required tending were assigned blues and yellows. For the loyalists who deserved extra care and attention: violets.

Leiliana’s room stood apart — decorated by a single stalk of foxglove. The intent either to serve as a warning of her deadly reputation, or to identify her as the Spymaster to others in the network.

He’d made it all the way out of the guest wing, beyond the adjoining hall, and into an unused corridor that led into the garden when a sound caught his ear. A click upon the marble floor. Sharp heeled shoes: neither advancing nor retreating. Just a shift of movement. Someone was there. A single person, lost, or simply enjoying a tour as he was.

His pace slowed to a wander, hands tucked at his back, as he rounded the next corner. There, he sighted Briala, newly appointed Marquise of the Dales and Empress’ Spymaster, standing off to one side of the hall by a row of paintings. Still dressed in her evening fineries: silver mask, and an off-shoulder gown deliberately picked to balance prestige and deference, but not so modest as to hide the status she’d gained with her assignment. Her gaze swept over him with a single brow raised, unimpressed, as though she’d set a meeting he was late for.

As he approached she rocked her weight from one foot to the other, cocking her hip against a glass display full of old swords from Chantry-won battles. Rusted and dirt-worn. Then greeted, “If it isn’t the Inquisitor’s Elven serving man.”
The words were thick with ire, leaving no question of her opinion on the introduction he’d been given. They had met during his last foray to the palace: she knew him both as valued member of the Inquisition and as agent in an old network.

“Hello, Solas.”

“We do not always have the luxury of choosing our titles, Ambassador,” he replied cordially. Solas came to stand before her, eyes drifting to follow the dance of her fingers as they drew patterns on the surface of the locked display behind her. Hands empty and open to view. She carried no weapons — only words. “I did not see you at the soirée earlier. Are you well?”

Casual introductions, to gauge her intent — she could be looking to trade. The meet was odd without a previous contact. Unlikely she was here to strike up conversation on the weather.

Ruby-painted lips quirked in an expression that came just short of an actual smile. “Quite,” she answered, folding her arms. She pushed off the case and walked a slow, measured, circle around him. Calculating. All the pride and confidence of a cat who had cornered an injured bird.

That was new.

“You’re a bit far from the servant’s quarters. Isn’t it a rather late to be up wandering the halls?”

Ah, they were fencing.

Allez - lunge.

“I was merely admiring the artwork,” he parried, turning to the wall with a nod. “Empress Celene has diverse taste. It is an impressive collection.” He gestured to a particularly large painting depicting the Exalted March, noting, “It appears to have been added to since my last visit.”

Briala was unmoved by the deflection. Curious, her attention drifting to the evidence he’d missed: a loose button at the top of his dress shirt hanging by a thread where it had been roughly tugged, and the dusky mark on his neck not quite hidden by the edge of his starched collar.

But, “It does lend a certain ambiance to the guest wing,” she agreed. Orlesian accent catching on the consonants as they rolled across her tongue. When it was clear the subtlety had failed to move him, she renewed, adding a pointed, “Though I’ve always thought the paintings displayed in the master room are rather gauche by comparison. They simply don’t add anything to the narrative, wouldn’t you agree?”

Feint.

There was a pause as he considered the lure. Was she inquiring or insinuating? And to what end?

Ultimately, he decided against taking the bait. Choosing to sidestep — “I will have to take your word for it,” — rather than an outright denial. He would grant her that advance.

Though she was far from discouraged. Instead, the Marquise pursed her lips and gave a quiet hum of amusement, cupping her chin in one hand. “Of course, they may not strike your interest,” she acknowledged. “The works in the library above the Eastern wing may be more to your taste. So quiet there… away from the crowds.”

With his eyes falling closed Solas did not see the way Briala’s smile followed the tilt of her head. She had his attention now.
“Do you know else that wing offers? An excellent view of the statues of the Valmont family. In the lower garden. Alas, not many appreciate the craftsmanship that goes into stone carving the way I do. I happened to be enjoying some time there earlier this evening. Alone.”

One hand raised — held in the air for the space of a breath — then slid slowly into her blouse. Carefully telegraphing her intention to retrieve something from it. Fingers delved beneath the seam at her breast, found the hidden pocket sewn there, and removed a small trinket.

A pendant — gleaming in the candlelight — delicately crafted of silver. It’s design a familiar weave of flower and horns. Snapped chain tucked neatly in her palm.

Briala held the lost charm between a finger and thumb. Tapped it with a nail. “I was always more fond of the old apartments off of the northern hall, myself. That is, if you can stand the dust. They’ve been under repair for years. Even the servants hardly know they’re there. Most importantly, the windows are all boarded. Light can still pass through curtains.” The Marquise toyed with the little sigil, rolling it between her fingers, then looped the broken chain over one and let it drop. Dangling from her hand as she extended it toward him. Swinging the prize side to side like a pendulum. “There’s even a bed.”

The match was hers. And Solas conceded her the win with a steeled glare and cold silence.

The trinket could have won her a negotiation if she’d have chosen to leverage it. Nothing played better than blackmail. But he would not thank her for the sacrifice.

He extended a hand — palm up — and she dropped the necklace into it. He tucked it into a coat pocket for safe-keeping.

“What a scandal that would be,” she was saying, “A torrid romance between the Herald and her serving man. Elves doing what they do best, they’d say.” She turned back to the display and ran a finger along the outermost edge. Rubbed it against her thumb. Making a show of checking it for dust.

She frowned when her fingers came up dirty — it had not been cleaned for some time.

They were safe to talk here.

“Rumour and supposition often follow power,” Solas deflected, borrowing the turn of phrase from a friend. “And without evidence, a rumour it would remain. It would hardly be the first she’d endured.”

Her eyes narrowed beneath the mask. “This is an interesting one though, as it does offer you quite a favourable position to suit your means. Beyond the protection it offers you as an apostate. There’s no better place to listen than at the bedroom door. I imagine all manner of things learned there would be valuable to your contacts.

“I’d say the accomplishment was testament to your skill but you don’t seem like the type to break hearts. Additionally, this would only threaten her reputation — and by extension yourself — if you were any less careful. A trusted confidant could gain nearly as much insight from a safer distance with the right approach.” The gaze turned penetrating. “It got me wondering: is the impunity offered by her bed worth the risk? Or was this something more simple?”

In a single step she closed the polite distance between them and flicked the button on his shirt. And when he drew back in surprise at their sudden, uncomfortable, proximity she followed it with a
laugh. Pleased by having taken him off guard so easily.

“Something tells me tactics didn’t play a part.” A pause for thought. Theatre — there wasn’t a word she hadn’t carefully planned. “Do give my compliments to her tailor: the dress flatters her curves well, it’s rare we enjoy them so ample.”

That cut was far surer, and when he turned a darkened gaze upon her she was set alight beneath it. Surprised and thrilled by the weight with which her strike had landed. Immediately, terribly, Solas saw his error.

It was bait and he’d taken it. She hadn’t known.

“No,” she breathed. Troubled by the revelation, but exhilarated by the victory that she’d won with it.

This prize was better than blood — he’d handed her a knife.

One with which he expected her to strike again.

But instead, “This is a very dangerous game you’re playing and not one many win,” she warned in a low whisper. All pretence dropped.

Once more she’d managed to surprise him. Enough so that he was briefly rendered speechless. Struggling to think of a suitable reply other than the counter he’d prepared for an insult he’d expected, but never came.

Quickly, “You speak from experience,” he responded. It was not a question, but neither an accusation. This had given them a strange common ground.

Her voice was hard. “Beyond the laughter and derision, Celene nearly lost both her position and her life when it came to light. Love is a vice few will tolerate in a leader when their chosen does not elevate their station. For someone already under scrutiny it will only offer detractors another weakness to exploit. There were wolves waiting to snap at any softness Celene showed, and in effort to prove her leadership was not compromised by it she laid waste to hundreds. Though I cannot forgive her the cruelty I also can’t say it wasn’t calculated; her actions assured she held the throne, where she could do better things for Elves than her cousin. Gaspard would’ve killed us all without a thought.

“If the Inquisitor is as worthy as she has shown it may balance her inexperience and give her the ability to face those wolves, but it will not guarantee victory against them. I have known the Dalish: and they are ruthless when they mean to be. But you underestimate the hardship this will cause you both.” Slowly, she reached up and moved her mask aside so she might meet his eye properly. Her gaze cold. “Leaders must do terrible things to survive, and she will be no exception. If you have made yourself a part of this those things will either be for you, or to you.”

That was a lie that came too close to the truth. It was not her potential for harm that he was worried for.

“It is something I bear well in mind.” Then, “Enough of this,” he snapped. Rapidly losing patience with the lecture. “Is this truly what you sought me for? Did you only come to gloat, or was there a point you were making?”

“Originally I came with information — the gloating was secondary.” She waved a hand dismissively. With her point made she drew her shoulders back into a surer stance. Guarded: the mask slid back on. Once more a woman of rank. “I would have given it to the Inquisitor directly
but our connections have been scarce since my appointment, and those we’ve exchanged were passed largely through Nightingale. Due to the sensitivity I’d rather it be handled with discretion. You were the logical contact even before I knew of your association—” she drew the word out slowly, giving emphasis to each syllable, “—as it turns out we share more in common than I once thought. Ironically, that will only make you a better point of contact.

“There’s been rumour of threats made of the Inquisitor coming from an Elven source in the Val Royaeurs alienage. Individuals capitalizing on perceived softness — but for Humans. Not unlike what surfaced for Celene. And like the Empress, regardless of the choices the Inquisitor makes from her seat I have a vested interest in her keeping it. She is an important representative to Elves hoping for change and her face forward benefits that end.”

Solas bristled. “The Inquisitor has done more good in her position than to deserve be reduced to serving as mouthpiece for her race.”

“Our race,” Briala corrected. “And currently she controls the highest seat one has ever held. The limitations of her command from it are a point of contention among many. Some feel she should be doing more, others fear she has too much influence already. Gods forbid an Elf ever issue a command someone else be forced to heed,” she scoffed. Then continued, “These few I speak of believe she’s a puppet of the Chantry, and something of a false idol to city Elves. They are hardly notable and barely a threat but it is a faction to watch, especially if they should gain any allies or she give them any reason to radicalize further. A lack of intervention in Orlais’ alienages, for instance…”

It was absurd enough that he almost laughed. Cutting her off to reply, “What is she expected to do in Orlais? She has no jurisdiction here. Nor beyond Skyhold, truly. The Inquisitor has neither lands nor the influence to impress rule upon either the Empress or King. The Inquisition was created to challenge Corypheus, not enact law.” With an indignant flourish, he gestured to her. “You of all people have a far better position to carry out change.”

Briala’s face fell and, “Oh, Solas,” she cautioned, clucking her tongue. He’d never hated the sound of his name more than when it bled from her mouth in that low, pitying tone. As if he were an even greater fool than her lowly expectations had set. “I hope you are not already so blinded that you would take offence to a friendly warning. I am not here to discuss my interventions. And it isn’t my thoughts that should concern you: thieves and thugs do not deal in truths. Her actual influence isn’t the point — and I am merely a messenger.”

“That then what do thieves and thugs intend to do, Briala?”

“If they are motivated? Sow discord in the most direct, messiest, way possible. Not much else matters; be it the truth or the wider impact of their actions. These types merely wish to stir trouble. Make a lasting impact. They will play dirty — and they will find a weakness to exploit.”

That point he could not argue. He’d known more than his fair share in his time.

Rather than reply, he bit his tongue and gave her a sharp nod of acknowledgment. Swallowing his pride rather than risk quarrelling further.

It was a cue that they had no more reason to linger here.

Point taken, warning exchanged, and lecture heard.

They were done.
She took the hint.

Although she would not leave the chance to twist, a final time, the knife she’d stolen from his mouth.

“I do hope, for both your sakes, that you do not fall prey to ‘rumour and supposition’. Among other things, I imagine whomever you report to would not be pleased to learn that you’ve compromised yourself.” She sighed. Somber — almost pitying. “I’d be sad to see you go. I do like you, Solas.”

It was almost funny.

*Almost.*

And he almost smirked. “Do you always ply your friends with threats and blackmail?”

“Only the ones I like the most,” she teased.

The click of Briala’s heeled shoes echoed in the empty hall when she finally turned away. Retreating back to the shadows that played in the flickers of low candlelight, streaming from the sconces mounted on dusty columns and old displays.

“Consider the necklace a gesture of good faith. In your gratitude you’ll owe me debt I can call upon later. And do pass on my well wishes,” she called as she left. Just loud enough for her voice to carry. She was not blind to the power she wielded with it. “For *all* the blessings you’ve brought upon her organization.”

And then she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve not read *The Masked Empire*, the relevant Sparknotes are: Briala was Celene’s handmaiden since childhood, spymaster in adulthood, they had a long (and secret) affair. That info was used to humiliate Celene and weaken her position for Gaspard to usurp. She burned an uprising of Halamshiral elves to prove she wasn’t compromised, and this among other things (like how crazy unbalanced and kinda toxic their relationship was in the first place) ultimately broke them apart. There’s a lot of shades of grey in there. It’s a good book. A sort-of-reconciled Briala would likely find a (by all accounts vulnerable) “spy” falling for his mark, a powerful leader, in *unbelievably* poor taste. Woman did not live and die on this hill to watch some dumbass climb up after her.
Catalyst (Part I)

Chapter Notes

So I had a choice to either cut at a good spot and post this part, and have a much shorter chapter after, or just make ya'll wait a lot longer for one bloated chapter. It feels better to split it and post this now. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s been hours,” Cassandra lamented.

“It’s been forty minutes,” corrected Bull.

She scoffed, but allowed a moment’s pause to consider.

“It’s been an hour.”

He chuckled. “Still only forty minutes.”

“That cannot be true. It is well past dawn and everything is packed.” She gestured beyond the boundaries of the small camp they’d set. Into the trees, where the morning light filtered through the canopy. It was hours to go until mid-day, but the sun had risen high enough to warm the worst of the chill from the air. Soft light at a sharp angle melted away patches of frost that clung to the forest floor, leaving it an uneven, spotted, green.

It was not long to solstice: with the days so short each minute past first light spent lingering at camp felt like a minute wasted. And there were few things that bothered Cassandra more than wasted time.

“We’ve been ready to leave for ages,” she said.

Bull replied, “We’ll be ready to leave when they get back.” She thought it too cordial and too patient to be anything less than a deliberate attempt to get under her skin. He did this all the time. His calm against her ire. “The tents are still up — unless you’d like to take it upon yourself to break them down. Besides, I haven’t finished breakfast.”

Pointedly, “That is your second serving,” she countered.

“And I’m not finished with it,” he repeated, and took a messy bite of the haunch. Tearing the meat right out of his palm so the juices ran down his wrist and chin. Spreading over his lips, it gave a greasy sheen to the grin he flashed her. “Rabbit is too lean to keep: it’d be tossed out if it went uneaten. Shame to waste it.”

“Can you not eat it on the road?” If he intended to down it all he’d spend at least another half hour on the task. “I should just go and get them — assist with the herbs so that we can leave.”

“You’re awfully anxious,” he dodged, a little slurred with his mouth full of food. “Do you have an appointment? A hot date you need to get ready for?”

A pink flush crept into her cheeks, stilling her tongue and the cutting remark she had ready on it.
Kindly, he did not draw attention to it. “We’ll be back by tomorrow afternoon, we’re making good
time Seeker.”

It was pointless to argue with him. She stood, and gave the firepit another turn to bury the embers.
Kicking at the dirt with the toe of her boot. Before she’d even finished that task she was already
scanning the camp in search of another to do after it, too restless to sit around. The problem was
she’d handled most of the chores already. They weren’t quite ready to go — Bull was half-right —
but only the tents and his three more servings of meat remained.

Plus packing whatever herbs the Inquisitor brought back.

Ugh.

He was saying: “We’re not passing by another river until we get to the foothills and nothing
valuable grows there. It’s a tundra. This is one of the better spots for blood lotus and we’ve been
low on firebombs for weeks. Plus, she needs a chance to walk in the woods. It’s good for her. And
with Solas helping it’ll take half the time. You only want to get moving so you can put as much
space between you and Orlais as possible.”

“Is that so terrible?” Cassandra snapped back. Had not meant to, really, and so offered a half-
hearted apology in the guilty look that followed. It was only the four of them now — they had no
reason to linger.

Vivienne had taken the opportunity to visit her beloved. She’d be gone a few weeks. She did not
mind the pageantry needed to navigate affairs in Orlais. And she always brought something
interesting back with her when she returned.

(While Cassandra would never admit it she had put in a request for something featured in the worn,
faded copy of The Randy Dowager someone had left in a corner of The Herald’s Rest).

Cullen, and the small party of soldiers who’d been their escort, strayed once they reached the
border camp. Scouts had intercepted a smuggler on his way to The Emerald Graves, and took from
him a coded message that mentioned a shipment of red lyrium going to Jader. They left
immediately on a march to the docks… leaving only the pair of warriors, Solas, and the Inquisitor
to travel the path back to Skyhold with their few packs of meagre supplies.

On Josephine’s order their clothing had been shipped back separately.

There was never an official itinerary to these journeys; no timetable to keep to other than the one
Cassandra set. She liked things a certain way — Bull sympathized. And he was patient to a point.
A soldier’s devotion to a rigid schedule was admirable but an hour here or there would hurt no one.
A slower pace kept morale high, he’d say. Gave people the time to stop and smell the roses. Take
a break. Shake the rocks out of their boots.

“You’re driving it a little hard. Relax. You only think we’re starting late because you were awake
before everyone else and started packing up while still on watch. Not smart, by the way, if your
attention is divided you’re leaving an opening.” For that he gave her a meaningful look. “Good
thing we’re not far from an Inquisition camp. These roads are guarded well enough that nobody
tries anything, so I’ll forgive you.”

Another scoff, but not so humourless this time.

“I’m not big on the palace either,” he added, tracking her as she circled the camp looking for
something to do. Not even a minute passed before she gave up the search and started breaking
down her tent. “Can’t stand those dress uniforms and Red wouldn’t budge on them. Itchy.”

That won him a proper laugh. “You only say that because you rarely wear shirts at all. They are not so bad. No worse than leather armour if you wear a tunic beneath it.”

“Yeah, but they’re hell to put on! The bottom two buttons are just decorative so I had to try and wrestle it over my head every time. Not so easy with these.” He gestured to his horns.

“Really?” She frowned. “Mine was not like that. Nor was Cullen’s.”

He spent a moment absorbing that. Then narrowed his eye.

“Wait — do you think she did that on purpose just to mess with me?”

“Leliana?” Another pause. “I would not put it past her. You did complain a lot about the clothes.”

“They’re itchy.”

“Perhaps you should be grateful it was not worse than that. We were only required to wear the shirt and jacket. The Herald looked lovely in her dress, but it was much more elaborate than the one she was made to wear last time. I imagine it took some time to get in and out of.”

“Less time with two sets of hands,” Bull muttered under his breath. The comment buried in the last mouthful of meat he tore off the bone. He threw the remains in the bushes behind him.

“True, but Josephine could not be there all the time. For what it’s worth I think she and Leliana would also have rather worn something more comfortable, had they the option. Leliana is rather fond of Orlesian fashion… but it is important to keep up appearances. And at least they kept their complaints to a minimum.” She pinned him with a look cast over her shoulder, briefly pausing her work. “Even Dorian did not whine as much as you.”

“Hey, that’s not fair: you’re only saying that because he wasn’t here to bring the curve up! If he had been, my whining would have barely stood out over all the other debauchery and scheming.”

Dryly, “There was quite a lot of it,” she conceded. “It is a wonder Orlais gets anything done. Perhaps if you spent more time watching instead of whining you could have learned something useful from it all.”

“Who says I wasn’t watching and whining? I can do both,” he countered. Then he added, “I was watching the whole time that guy in the weird hat was trying to pick you up. That line he gave you about the figs was pretty good. A little direct, but I’ll give him points for bravery.” His eye twinkled when she met it, but she only rolled hers. He chuckled. “Good job not decking him.”

That got a smile. A small one.

“It was a struggle,” she admitted.

“I could tell.”

Her work on the tent was swift and practiced. When the canvas collapsed she dropped to hands and knees with it, crawling as she rolled it into a tight coil. “Did you see anything more interesting than lecherous Dukes? Since our last visit things have seemed quiet in Orlais… I’ve heard little news.”

With one hand she held the roll in place and beckoned to Bull with the other. When he did not immediately respond to the cue, she sighed, then pointed at the coil of hemp rope near his feet. Dutifully, he passed it to her and she began tying.
“Nothing worth reporting,” he answered. “Although I did notice a couple of the elven servants were a little more hostile this time than last. Nothing terrible, but it stood out. Could ask Solas if he noticed it, too.”

She nodded. “They are usually the first to hear of any trouble, and they speak more freely around him. The information he gathered during our last visit was invaluable.” With a grunt of effort Cassandra tightened the last knot, bracing her foot against her pack to hold it in place as she secured the tent to the side of it. Then she stood to inspect her work. Wiped her brow with her sleeve. “Though now that I think of it I barely saw him at all while we were there.”

Bull huffed. “Solas is real good at slipping into the shadows when he wants to.”

“He’d have to be, as an apostate. Were he not so skilled he surely would have been captured by the Circles long ago.”

In reply Iron Bull gave only a noncommittal hum and said no more on the subject. Cassandra made another pass through the camp. Bull’s eye tracked her as she walked, amused, waiting for the frown that would inevitably follow when she remembered there was still nothing left to do.

It took another minute but she got there.

“Surely now it has been an hour?”

He laughed. Full, loud, and from deep in his belly.

She ignored him. “Solas mentioned something about ruins last night just before we set camp. He said they were not far from the river.” The implication was clear without need to elaborate. While he rarely allowed himself to be driven to such distraction it would not be the first time Solas was waylaid by his love of ancient places. They had a way of luring him.

Bull raised an eyebrow. “What — you think he got bored with the herb gathering and fell asleep on some crumbling statuary?”

“One would hope the Herald would discourage such activities,” she deadpanned.

There was a pause. And an odd way he set his jaw… as though he’d readied one reply, thought better of it, and decided on something else. Then he leaned back and scratched his chin. “Give it another fifteen minutes — then you can go get them if you really want.”

More than the dismissiveness it was the fact that he’d phrased it like an order that irritated her. But if he was surprised by the response his tone provoked he did not show it. “I am not beholden to you,” she stammered, flustered. “And I’m not waiting any longer. There’s no need to spend half the morning gathering herbs.”

“There’s still three more tents to break down!” Bull called after her. “You could start with mine!”

She made sure her reply was loud enough to carry back to camp before she left earshot.

“Ugh.”

As it happened, finding the trail proved to be a more difficult task than she’d first anticipated. Once she’d left the camp her conviction didn’t carry her far. All she had to go on was the vague recollection of Solas’ comments as they’d ridden along the road the night before, and an even
vaguer memory of where the river was located based on their last time camping in the area.

Southwest.

Or maybe South-Southwest.

*Something about a fallen tree?*

If he’d truly become side-tracked he’d gain nothing valuable from the detour. Dreams aside, ruins generally weren’t a good source of *anything* other than rashvine… though she could concede his knowledge of herb-lore was likely superior to her own. She lacked the practical experience of one who’d spent years wandering.

It took another ten minutes of going in circles before her persistence was rewarded with the discovery of a cobblestone path. Broken corners only barely visible beneath a thick blanket of moss. Following it was more guesswork than guidance — so much had been reclaimed by the undergrowth — but intuition filled in the gaps time had sown and she was vindicated when that instinct found her standing before the remains of an archway. Roots and weather had torn at the connecting walls until they were indistinguishable from any other pile of rocks. Aeons turned it to rubble; it was easy to miss unless one was searching for it. Only the set of steps rising out of the weeds beyond the arch marked it as having once been an entrance.

The steps numbered no more than twenty up before bending to the right, then followed a sharp descent that led her below ground level and into a small tunnel. There she found a length of rashvine swirled around a column, untouched. Cautiously she pulled it free. Tucking it into her bag with a gloved hand to ensure she did not feel the effects that led to its name. She gathered half a dozen more this way before she realized the whole tunnel was covered in it. If the Inquisitor and Solas had passed through they’d clearly thought it not worth the trouble, so she left it too.

From there the path forward was complicated by tangled roots and rockslides. It was difficult to get a sense of where to head. She quickly lost her sense of direction and gave up on navigating by sight — one crumbling column was no different from the next. Instead, she followed the sound of the bubbling river southward until it was not so distant.

That served her better and soon she found another covered passage to duck into. It deposited her at the mouth of a walled courtyard filled with statues and raised garden beds. Most were cracked apart; now home to trees and bushes, long overgrown.

Her first step into the yard almost sent her reeling as she tripped over an exposed root. A second glance and, *no*, not a root — *blood lotus*.

A pile of it.

All the stalks carefully aligned in the same direction. Roughly the size and shape of a bushel one might have carried under an arm and then dropped to the ground. Some were still wet from the river.

When she bent to retrieve a handful that had rolled away she spied a more worrying sight: not thirty paces ahead Solas’ staff and the Herald’s bow and quiver were leaning against a rock. *Curious.*

It did not appear they had been left behind in a hurry, though she struggled to come up with any reason they’d be left behind at all. There were no signs of struggle: no scuffs or tracks marred the path, and Solas’ staff had neither the ambience nor temperature indicative of recent use. It was
almost as though they’d simply left them there and… *walked off.*

Nothing about the finding was indicative of danger yet she couldn’t deny it was odd. Neither would leave their weapons voluntarily… which meant they could have been ambushed. Or taken. This road was rarely trouble so close to other camps but any negligence of duty invited opportunity.

Bull had just chided her carelessness on watch — she would not be shamed for it twice.

With her hand ready on the pommel of her sword Cassandra took off running deeper into the structure. Around one corner, then two, and the search found her in a narrow yard bordered by several smaller nooks. Enclosed, protected, and above all: *private.* There, she sighted them. And initially the scene she came upon did not seem so unusual.

Solas was seated on a patch of grass, leaning against the base of a large statue. He was injured. The Herald, crouched over him, tended to a wound on his bare chest. Though not a terrible one: Cassandra could see no blood at this distance. A relief, since neither were in reach of the healing potions stored in their belts… scattered on the ground with the rest of their armour. They were speaking in hushed tones far too soft to hear and she imagined them to be arguing as they often did when one fell to a trap or arrow due to too must trust in their surroundings.

But when the Herald gestured widely in emphasis, then followed it with a touch to Solas’ shoulder, he cried out in pain.

No… *laughed?*

He was laughing.

And his hand was on her hip.

*Where are her pants?*

It was only then that the reality of what she was witnessing truly dawned and she was brought to a sudden and complete stop. Her legs stopped working entirely.

He was *not* injured.

At once she was grateful that the Herald’s linen chemise was so ridiculously ill-fitted and overlarge for her Elven frame that it reached half-way to her thighs. Without it Cassandra would have had a much more scandalous view of a Herald whose knees were astride Solas’ lap. One she’d have plenty of time to memorize over the long and *excruciating* minute it took to force her feet to obey her commands.

Over that minute several things became apparent.

Chiefly, her gratitude that Bull had stalled her leave an extra five so she would come upon them when they were talking and not… *earlier.* Next: the casual, practiced, ease with which they’d found a reason to leave camp together had raised no suspicion at all — this was far from the first time they had stolen away. They’d even managed to actually gather a fair amount of herbs first.

But the most significant was his smile.

As he reached for his discarded shirt the Herald said something to him that made him meet her gaze. Whatever it was she’d never know, but the smile he gave her then was not a quirk of the lips or the amused, still-polite, curl she knew well — but a wide, glowing grin that reached his eyes and brightened his cheeks. An unabashed show of deep and profound affection she’d never seen from
him before. Nor, really, thought him capable of. While his love of history and spirits could be called “romantic” at a stretch, it was not a label she would use in any other case. She had not known him to look at anything with adoration.

Watching now, as he slid a hand along the Herald’s jaw and kissed her, that would have to be amended.

Somehow, more than their state of dress or the closeness of their embrace, the smile was the most intimate thing she’d stolen with her trespass.

For a second moment beyond the first she could only stand and stare. Awed.

And then abruptly the shock wore away and she remembered exactly what she was witnessing.

Dazed and bewildered, she finally managed to command her body to move and was able to turn on her heel and quickly — quietly — head back the way she came. As she hurried past the discarded weapons and herbs another burst of bright and easy laughter followed her through the garden. His, as well as hers.

By the time she made it out of the ruin her cheeks were burning.

Somehow she made it back to camp — though she had no memory of how she found her way there. One minute she was in the ruin and the next she was sitting in front of the firepit. By some miracle her body had managed to find its way entirely on its own. Pleasantly — alarmingly — empty.

Later, she thought that this must be what others referred to as an ‘out of body’ experience. Perhaps at some point she would return to it.

For now her mind was such a jumble of fraught accusations, questions, and mortifying imagery that it had simply ceased to function rather than try to sort them through.

She was vaguely aware of someone speaking when she re-entered the circle and sat down on a rock but the words floated by. Meaningless. Lost to the storm of blood rushing in her ears and the heat of a crimson blush that still stained her face.

When her thoughts finally managed to find purchase the conclusion she reached was a startling one: this was no fleeting tryst. You do not look at someone with that kind of tenderness without calling them beloved. His smile had been a vulnerable and deeply private thing. It was lovely. They were lovely. They were happy.

*They were in love.*

Once that realization struck, and a sordid story began to fill in around it, so too came the questions. How long had this gone on? Did anyone else know? Was she the first to find out? Was she the only one who had not? Why the sneaking?

*It could not have been the entire time, could it?*

But, no, they were so cold to each other at first that others felt the need to intervene to keep them civil. Maker forbid anyone brought up the Dalish. An unlikely pairing, but there was something undeniably romantic about the idea that love had taken root and blossomed in that frozen soil.
The thought of flowers made her think of herbs. Which made her realize how often they had taken to gathering them on their journeys. ‘Just’ a quick run to resupply their potion stock. An hour here or there raised no eyebrows. Some mornings Solas would offer to bring another, who would always politely decline in favour of encouraging the Herald — she seemed to enjoy the opportunity more than anyone else. Sometimes she would not immediately follow, instead lingering around the camp to help others with their chores first… but she would always find a way to join later.

A ruse!

It had been going on for ages.

*It had always been a ruse! An excuse to find the opportunity to—*

To—

“Seeker!” Bull’s voice tore her from her thoughts.

He was staring at her. She hadn’t noticed.

“What?”

Gently, “Are you alright?” he prompted. One brow quirked curiously.


“Are you sure?” Iron Bull leaned forward, lifting a hand from his upraised knee to make a sweeping gesture toward her. “I’ve been trying to get your attention for a few minutes now.”

“Oh.” The heat was creeping back into her cheeks again. “What did you want?”

“Did you find them?”

Cassandra opened her mouth to reply but quickly reconsidered. It would not do to speak the first answer on her tongue. A moment passed before she tried again. Failed. She repeated this sequence several more times before finally deciding to go with a firm, “No!”

There was a pause.

“Did you find something else?”

A hush fell over them. All the while Bull watched her expectantly. Patient, but looking less so as the silence stretched on. The only thing assuring he’d not lost it entirely was the one brow climbing ever-higher on his forehead.

“Cassan—?”

“Rashvine!” she blurted.


The Seeker plunged her hand into her bag and produced one of the vines she’d plucked from the ruined walls. She held it out.

“Ah,” said Bull, inspecting it. “Yes. Rashvine, I see.” He narrowed his eye. “Are you sure you’re alright?”
But her assurance was cut short by Solas and the Herald returning to camp. Weapons tucked securely on their backs and arms full of the blood lotus she’d tripped over not ten minutes past. They were mid-way through a conversation about the ruin; what might have occupied it in the last age. The Herald gestured to a rubbing she’d taken of an inscription, tied to her hip. Solas suggested she share the discovery with Dorian, as he’d recently mentioned an archivist he knew who traded in such things.

If the discussion was intended as part of the deception it was convincing enough to make Cassandra doubt what she’d seen. Up until they were close enough to see the lingering spots of colour in Solas’ face and the grass stain on the Herald’s pants, that is.

She gave no greeting so Bull filled in for her.

“There you are!” he exclaimed. For a moment she hoped their arrival might provide a welcome distraction from his interrogation, but then he added, “Cass was getting impatient. She was about ready to go looking for you.”

Her head snapped toward him — blinking in shock — but she quickly tempered it best she was able. It was a lie. Though he did not react at all for having told it and gave her no indication as to why he’d chosen to.

Unless…

*He knew!*

*He knew the whole time!*

Worse, he knew she knew and was covering for her.

“My apologies, Seeker — I was distracted,” offered Solas. He dropped the armful of herbs on the ground and sat down next to it. Starting the careful work of cutting away the stems with a skinning knife pulled from his pocket. He was saying, “A ruin near the river offered such beautiful sights, it would be remiss of me not to explore them. I had thought we’d the time to spare.”

“Anything worth sharing?” prompted Bull.

“Nothing that would interest anyone else, I’m afraid.”

He made a disappointed noise. “Ah, too bad.”

*That wasn’t even subtle.*

After dropping her own bundle of lotus next to Solas’ the Herald went to work on breaking down her tent. Barely offering her lover so much as a second glance once they’d returned. There were no sly touches or lingering looks; no awkwardness to give them away. They acted like the friends Cassandra had always known — thought — them to be. She joked with Bull about the third serving of rabbit he was working on. Made a light-hearted comment on the speed at which Solas worked the herbs. An implication was made about the usefulness of his hands that nearly passed as innocent. Then Bull turned it into proper innuendo. They laughed. And somehow no one seemed at all moved by the fact that there were several layers of subtext woven into the conversation that not everyone was picking up on.

Then there was a comment about rations. Another about the weather. And soon they’d all settled
into the same easy, comfortable, banter they always did.

All the while Cassandra sat in stupefied silence.

She watched Solas while he worked. Carefully separating each bud from the stem with a quick cut. Rolling the knife along his thumb to split the blossom without bruising so they would keep in the wrapped linen cocoons for travel. Effort that kept his shoulders tense and back straight. The perfect picture of a quiet, reserved, academic at work. So unlike the tender and passionate man she’d just glimpsed.

She found she could not reconcile the two.

They had known each other for two years and she’d never once seen that side of him before today. He was the first to join their cause — willingly, at least — always keen to answer questions, yet clearly much more accomplished at preserving mystery than she’d thought.

“Seeker?”

He’d paused his work.

She was staring.

A vision of the courtyard scene briefly replaced the one of him seated before her. A sight that would surely be burned into her memory forever. Every detail painfully, permanently, recorded: from the rumpled hem of the Herald’s chemise to the subtle tilt of Solas’ chin before he leaned in.

There was a scar on his side she’d not noticed before. Thick enough to have come from a serious wound, the kind an apostate might receive if caught by Templars perhaps… though he’d claimed to never run into any. If she had any better reason to know of it she might have asked to hear the story. Daring tales of capture and escape were not something she had much opportunity to indulge in but they were always fascinating. She greatly enjoyed hearing them around a fireside. Solas had never shared any.

He’d never shared much of anything, really.

“Cassandra?”

She was still staring.

This was not going to get any easier.

In a rush she clambered to her feet. Stammered out, “I—I will be back shortly.” And then, with no explanation or excuse to offer, she simply turned around and left the camp. Her companions left to exchange bewildered looks in the silence that followed.

Her feet carried her as far as a small glen between their camp and the road. Had she the wherewithal she might have noticed it was overgrown with royal elfroot and taken the opportunity to harvest it. They could always use the extra reserve. Instead she spent several minutes standing stock still in the middle of the glade, brows knit in consternation, staring into the middle distance. Trying to string two thoughts together.

The reprieve her escape had granted was only temporary: she’d been followed out. Bull didn’t make his presence known until he was right behind her. His deep voice pitched low so not to travel far.
“It’s a pretty good secret, right?”

Startled, Cassandra whirled around with an open palm pressed to her chest. Catching a shriek but not quite the gasp so what followed was a choked, undignified, snort. “Bull!” she exclaimed, and then frowned deeply, “Do not sneak up on me!”

He chuckled, raising both hands in apology before folding his arms over his broad chest and leaning against a nearby tree. It bowed under his weight. “Sorry, I thought you heard me coming.”

“No, I was…”

Not thinking.

Not doing much of anything.

Just standing there, really.

His grin was a slow, sly, thing that curled up one scarred cheek until he was positively beaming. Smouldering and self-satisfied like he’d won a bet she’d promised to pay dearly for. He said, “I’m guessing maybe you did find them,” and the timbre of his voice was so thick with innuendo there was no mistaking his meaning. “Get an eyeful?”

The blush rising on her cheeks answered for her. His grin only widened.

She coughed. Began, “I did not— They weren’t— I wasn’t looking—” A pause. Then a resigned sigh. “They did not see me.”

“I gathered,” he laughed. “Would have been a much more interesting scene back at camp if they had.”

It wasn’t readily apparent if that was something he was grateful for or disappointed by.

“I did try to make you wait.”

For that she turned on him, embarrassment fuelling the fire of righteous furor. She pointed, accusing, “You knew!”

“Of course I knew.”

It was not the answer she was expecting. She didn’t know what she was expecting.

“How—?” The question didn’t quite make it past her lips. There was more than one and she couldn’t narrow it down to a ranked list just yet.

Flatly, “Spy,” he replied. “Even if I wasn’t, I can’t think of any other good reason why Solas started smelling like hair oil all of a sudden.”

Wrong answer. Wrong question. She tried again: “How long?”

His brow lifted. “How long have I known or how long has it been going on?”

“Both!” she blustered. “Either!”

He scratched his chin as he considered. Too casual — he was doing it again. “Hm. A little more than a year maybe?” Then before she could interject, “Same answer, both questions,” he clarified. He waved a hand back and forth. “They were off and on for a bit.”
“A year?!” It was like he was talking about the weather. *Surely this could not be common knowledge.* “Does everyone know?”

“Nah, they’ve been pretty careful about keeping it under wraps. Dorian knows. So does Red. I think Varric might have figured it out, too. And now you.” He gestured toward her. “Not sure about anyone else. If they do know they’re being respectful about it. Not exactly the kind of thing you want to put on a banner.”

“No,” Cassandra agreed, and pressed her mouth into a hard line. She could not argue that point. The Herald faced a nation of bigotry and superstition. The hurdles she’d overcome, and those still before her, were innumerable. Taking a lover at all was a foolish choice under such scrutiny — no matter the solace company might offer — finding one in an apostate even more so. “As unpleasant as it is to admit, it would not reflect kindly. I am aware of what prejudice speaks of her. Her detractors are cruel, and unfortunately numerous…”

Savage Dalish. Rabbits. Knife-ears. Common criminals and filthy bandits who spent their time scheming and fucking. It felt blasphemous even to acknowledge the existence of the jeers. Whispered in corners, behind fans, or masks of nobility.

It was inescapable at Haven, when she was little more than a trespasser blamed for the falling sky. Even Skyhold was not a refuge from the storm. Public opinion was turning as news spread of her many deeds but it was a slow and arduous process. The raising of a single elf would not forgive an eon of enmity toward her people. There were still many who’d feel pride to see her live up to their racist preconceptions.

All the more reason to show her support; for all the paths Lavellan might walk she was still Andraste’s chosen. Perhaps it would reassure her to hear it.

“Should…” Cassandra began. Hesitant. “Should I tell them?”

The Qunari’s lone eye widened. “And miss out on that double-talk Solas does when he thinks nobody picks up on it? *Fuck no!“ The laugh that followed was deep, loud, and would easily carry back to camp if ears were listening for them. He unlaced his arms and pushed off the tree, closing the distance between them so he could drop his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Did you catch that comment he made last night about finding treasure in Elven ruins? *Dirty.*” Then he waved a hand, dismissing the notion. “Better not to say anything. Besides, I get the sense it’s complicated… even beyond the politics. If they’re not ready to talk about it yet, don’t push them. Let them think they’ve kept their secret another day.”

Belatedly, he added, “I’m sure they’ve got more than one.”

They made good time in spite of Cassandra’s grumbling. Though she had little to say once they set out that morning — the ride was unusually quiet.

By evening they’d reached the valley at the base of the Frostbacks, almost a day’s ride from Skyhold. Iron Bull spied a rocky gorge not far from the road where they could set camp. Safe and tucked away, with high walls and thick trees that offered enough protection to keep a fire going without giving away their position. A calculated risk: it was colder now and blankets alone weren’t enough to ward off the stiff knees and frozen fingers that the chill gifted them. Soon they’d have to
start doubling up to conserve warmth.

Fortunately, few journeys were planned once the weather turned and the rivers froze. Too cold; too difficult to navigate the roads. One of the benefits of obtaining a massive keep was the size of its storehouses — and coffers — which provided ample incentive for tradesmen to take up permanent residence. Ply their wares and craft year round. The only regular caravans through the pass during the coldest months were standard supply runs: food, steel, and linens to keep them over-stocked. Meets and plans could wait for the spring thaw.

This journey might be the last any of them would take for a while. A long while for Ellana in particular, depending on how she fared over the following months. The next foray she took beyond the walls would likely be the one to a birth house. Though nothing had been officially planned at this stage Josephine had implied she would be moved somewhere other than a military fortress when her time came. Earlier, even — before her state became obvious enough that a walk around the grounds might risk a rumour. Today she could still bury herself beneath a thick winter coat, but soon enough an extra layer of fur might not be enough to hide her changing figure.

The thought stirred an odd mix of relief and melancholy.

On one hand travelling in this state was exhausting. Not just for her dwindling energy but also for the effort put into hiding herself each morning. Her bindings and armour needed adjustments every week; two spent en route meant they were uncomfortably ill-fitting already. She could barely breathe — gods forbid she was made to fight like this.

On the other, it meant she wouldn’t get another chance to wander the woods for some time. There would be no hunting, foraging, or riding through icy rivers on horseback once her belly was tight and heavy. No crunch of the snow under her feet — bow at the ready — while a babe slept tied her chest. It might be the last time this season she set her tent beneath a blanket of stars and fell asleep listening to the crackle of a spitfire. Simple pleasures she craved when the long nights trapped her behind stone walls. Lonely… not for company, but for the trees. Skyhold might be safe but it was also boring. She was far from her Dalish roots, there. Cabin fever was bad enough over a typical wintering, this one would be twice as long.

Perhaps that was why the campfire was so mesmerizing tonight: nostalgia — profound, if not premature. The grief of missing the wilds before she’d yet lost them.

She was tired too, from the long ride, and with her eyes bleary and unfocused the tongues of flame looked like dancing. Leaning, not flickering; bowing to and fro as though they’d been given pattern and purpose. It was hypnotic.

She rest her chin on an upraised knee, one arm wrapped around her leg and the other held out before her. With two fingers she drew patterns in the air: at first following the curves of flame and then tracing the bright orange veins on the logs fuelling them. Their burning cores visible between the cracks in the bark. With one eye closed she could pretend to direct the fire — draw it out, and up. Pull forth a stream of sparks that floated in the air and then settled in her upraised palm. She imagined, for a moment, catching the embers in the cup of her hand and then blowing them away like so much sand. Sparkling as they fell, like twinkling stars.

A lazy turn of her wrist shifted the reverie into something less fanciful: not stoking now, but smothering the fire with a firm, downward push. Taming the elements as if she were a born mage. It was a mere pantomime, but when she moved her hand just so she could block the fire pit with the shadow of her wrist and that fantasy was almost as satisfying as actually performing the magic herself.
At some point she became aware of Solas’ eyes upon her. Across the camp he sat with legs crossed before a pile of herbs and linen strips, finishing the last of the preparation begun that morning. Initially Cassandra had opted to help him with the task, but for whatever reason found it too difficult to focus, and bowed out half-way through in favour of caring for her armour. It seemed he was having difficulty committing as well, as Ellana clearly made for a more interesting scene. He was watching her with the barest hint of a smile. Amused. He’d caught her playing pretend.

She’d be embarrassed by the attention if he didn’t look so terribly fond. So instead of shrinking away she met his eyes and demonstrated an exaggerated flourish of her wrist and fingers. Imitating the way he moved his hands when he cast. The gesture was clumsy, even for mockery, but the intent was clear as a depiction of magecraft.

His smile turned wry as he lifted a hand, mirroring hers, and rotated it in a slow, upward spiral. Curling his fingers against his thumb and then, at the apex of the movement, spreading them open like a blossoming flower.

‘Like this’ corrected the gesture.

‘Like this?’ her mimicry replied. The unfurling of her fingers not quite as smooth as his.

A subtle shake of his head and he repeated the motion. Now with careful, slow, emphasis on the way his fingers waved. He mouthed the Elvish word for bloom — felgara — and this time she tried to visualize that as she moved. Turned her hand at the wrist and unfolded her fingers from her palm like the petals on a sunflower as it greeted the day. Imagining the light coaxing change from her skin.

She could almost feel the warmth of the sun upon her.

And then, suddenly, she’d captured it.

There was a soft crackle and then a tiny ball of flame appeared. Floating in the air a few inches above her palm.

Solas reacted before she did. Eyes wide, he immediately dropped the handful of herbs he was holding and pushed to his feet in the same instant she loosed a started, “Oh!” — the sound drawing the attention of Cassandra and Iron Bull. But unlike them it wasn’t surprise in his expression, but pride. Delight, unabashed and unmistakable in the curl of his smile. He approached her in awe: this was a proper spell and she’d cast it!

That joy was infectious — she could not help but grin. Even as the others reacted with alarm.

Cassandra mistook it for something having caught fire and scrambled for her waterskin. In an instant she had the spout open and leapt forward, onto her knees, with a frantic, “Herald!” Ready to either throw the container across camp or try to put her out herself. With no reason to suspect anything other than a clumsy mishap with the campfire, it was only by Solas’ quick defence that she was stopped from drenching them both.

With a hand raised, “It’s alright!” he urged, and positioned himself between her and Ellana. “It’s a spell.”

Bull, though, recognized the act as magical even before Solas intervened. Lone eye wide with shock he uttered a quiet, “Oh, fuck,” and sat unmoving across camp. Hands stilled in mid-sweep across his axe, holding tight to a whetstone. He had no intention of approaching.

Slowly Solas sank to his knees in front of Ellana, cupping her open palm — flame and all —
between his own. Their hands not quite touching. For a moment he was silent, considering, and
then his smile widened. “That is… impressive,” he praised. The compliment was genuine. “Can
you feel the flow of magic as you hold it? The way it pulls from the Veil?”

“I think so,” she answered. It was near imperceptible. Less a pull and more of a push — like water,
pouring, and gathered in cupped hands. If she thought of it like a physical thing she could almost
feel its weight… a little heavier than the air and near overflowing.

“Herald?” Cassandra sounded only slightly less panicked. She’d lowered the waterskin but had yet
to cork it.

“It’s alright, Ellana soothed. Her eyes darted to Solas for reassurance — he was still looking at
the flame. The Seeker was staring too, though far less assured. “I’m alright,” she said again.

Iron Bull cleared his throat. “So uh, this is new — right? Since when can you do that?”

“Is it from the Anchor?” Cassandra added.

The suggestion was a good one, and close enough to honesty not to taste bitter on her tongue when
she answered, “Yes, I believe so.” The truth was far more complicated, but the way the spell
floated over the tear in her palm, prickling at something within her, didn’t feel like mere
coincidence. The Anchor was his magic, the transference was his magic, even what grew within
her was his magic in a way. Whatever small acts of magecraft she could produce, even by accident,
were part of that. Blaming the mark wasn’t entirely without precedence.

She said, “I’ve been more sensitive lately. To magic. Solas has been helping me try to control it.
I’ve not been able to summon a spell before, though. Well—” The details weren’t important. “—not
like this, anyway. I didn’t think I could. Awareness of the Veil is one thing, but this…”

This was something wholly unexpected.

She rolled her hand back and forth experimentally, watching as the flame followed the movement.
Gliding along her skin now rather than hovering above it. Rolling like water — or smoke. Similar
to how she’d imagined playing with the sparks just moments ago. Channeling this spell was so
effortless she might have sworn she was still pretending.

Most interestingly, it did not burn. Neither was it cool, really; magic was the catalyst not the fuel
— when nothing was consumed it would provide no heat. It made a strange sort of sense, though
having not grown up with training she didn’t fully understand the theory. As a test she waved her
other hand through it. Then jerked it back with a pained hiss when, unexpectedly, it still stung.

“It is real fire,” Solas supplied — answering the question she’d not yet asked. “But it will not harm
you while you are channeling. The act of summoning creates a buffer between a caster and the
spell’s effects in order to maintain its connection to the Fade; it is a sympathetic exchange. Ice will
not freeze you, and lightning will not shock — not unless you stem that flow. Dissolving the
connection will dissolve the buffer. However, it does not extend beyond its point of origin unless
you expand it. Simply waving your other hand through will burn you the same as it would an
enemy.”

He demonstrated by casting a flame in his own palm and raised two fingers on his opposite hand,
passed them through the fire, and held them up to show her how his skin had blackened. “But if
you channel the same spell from the other hand…” This time he flicked his fingers. They sparked.
And when he passed them through the fire a second time it did him no harm. Then he began to
stretch and roll the spell between his hands. Manipulating it as if it were clay; passing the fire to
and fro, growing and shrinking.

He clenched his fist and it disappeared — the magic dismissed.

With a nod, “Try it yourself,” he encouraged. “It will feel similar to the way you took the spell from me before we left Skyhold. Expand the connection into your other hand and the fire can no longer hurt it.”

She took a deep breath to steel herself and raised her right hand once more — balancing it alongside her left. Though it trembled, both from excitement and nerves, she managed to hold it steady for long enough to feel a faint sense of something there. Not warmth, not like a proper fire, but something like the crackle in the air left behind when the ground was hit by a lightning bolt. A thickening. Warping. A vibration in the space around the spell, like an aura.

*The Veil!*

Once she became aware of it the whole world seemed to open around her — as though a blindfold had been lifted from her eyes. It had always been there yet she’d never been able to sense it before now. Not like this.

It was just as he’d always said: everywhere. In the air. On her skin. She could feel the way it connected to everything. Pouring from her mark, drawn around Solas’ staff resting against his pack, the void around Cassandra. And with that heightened awareness she found she could make her fingers stick against its edge and delicately… *pull.*

There was a snap. Then a ripple. Echoes of it lapping against her body like rings on the surface of a pond.

Then the flame didn’t just shift — it *expanded.* Quickly engulfing both her hands down to the wrists. Startled, she reflexively flung them outward, fingers spread wide. And the fire blazed brighter still. Surging, until she managed to will her pulse to slow its thunderous pace, and with it the fire settled to a low, persistent roar. Crackling across her bared skin and over the leather armguards she’d not yet taken off for the evening’s rest.

While fierce, and powerful, the spell left them undamaged — she had control. She was controlling this.

She held up both hands in triumph, and though proud Solas could not help but recoil when she brought them too close to his face in her enthusiasm. His smile faltered, but for a fraction of a second, and within it she saw a shade of unease flash across his features. But then he gave her a decisive nod and she was caught back up in the excitement of success.

“Very good,” he approved.

Ellana turned her burning hands toward her companions so they could share in her victory, but they did not reward her with the same praise. Instead they both looked very, very uneasy. Wide eyes searched her, Solas, and then each other. All too familiar with the terrifying potential of untrained magic users — they were not eager to congratulate her on joining their ranks. Though Solas was skilled, and confident, their trust in his control of the situation only extended so far. Cassandra held herself like a bow ready to fire: one hand still resting on her waterskin and a leg braced behind her so she could leap up at a moment’s notice.

Bull just looked nervous. The way he did when they’d first faced rifts together. Or in the Fade, at Adamant.
“Right,” he said thinly. He had yet to drop his axe. “That’s great. Really great. Glad this is a thing you can do now. But maybe this isn’t the best place to experiment with fire.”

Cassandra slowly nodded her agreement. Her eyes never left Ellana. “While this is certainly an interesting development, I agree with Iron Bull. Perhaps a more contained setting, with guidance, would be better. And safer.”

“Like a Circle?” snapped Solas.

“Like Skyhold,” she clarified, not without a note of annoyance at his quick judgement.

“Like anywhere I’m not present,” added Bull in a low tone. “Now can you shut it off?”

Solas’ expression soured, but Ellana cut over him with a firm, “Of course,” and gave him a look that said in no uncertain terms he was to hold his tongue. She knew where he was going with this; there was no reason to hash it out here. The order was heeded, and he offered no more protest, but the sidelong glance told her he’d have words with her over the matter later.

Ellana clenched both her hands into fists — mimicking the same act she’d seen Solas perform to dismiss the spell — but nothing happened.

Confused, she tried again… and again there was no change.

When she tried a third time and the resulting failure made her pulse kick up, the flames surged brighter with it.

Sensing her unease, “You must cut off the flow of magic both in body and mind,” Solas instructed.

That sounded like a direct contradiction of his earlier instruction. “Won’t that take away the buffer you spoke of? I don’t want to be burned,” she said, voice rising. She’d never been afraid of fire.

His answer was firm. “You will not be, if it is done correctly.”

For someone so smart, he was abysmal at choosing his words for comfort.

“That’s not very reassuring!”

The second attempt was better. “When you close a rift you are connecting to the raw energy of the Fade using the mark, not unlike casting a powerful spell, then using that connection to mend the tear. You pull it closed. Nothing can emerge from a rift once the curtain is drawn back over it. The action here is the same, just on a smaller scale. Cut it off at its source and no harm will come to you.”

* A spell is a window to the Fade — so close it.

She thought of drawing the blinds closed in her tower room back at Skyhold; tried to visualize using them to smother the light shining through… but that didn’t seem to do anything either. It was getting harder to focus her thoughts. Now she couldn’t remember how the Veil felt when she’d touched it just a moment ago. And the fire was starting to feel warm.

“Maybe comparing it to rifts is the wrong approach,” Bull said with a nervous chuckle. “I mean, have you seen the way her hand blows up when she connects to them? Not really the comparison I’d want to make if you’re trying to—”

He was cut off when the flames suddenly expanded. Billowing out in two huge plumes that briefly
engulfed both of Ellana’s arms and licked across her chest. Solas’ too, on account of how closely he knelt to her. He was spared a burn by his quick reflexes: leaping backward just in time to avoid it catching on the ragged edge of his vest. The spots of blackened ash on his clothes and the singed edge of his eyebrow said he’d only made it by a hairsbreadth.

He was on his feet now.

The scent of burnt hair filled her nostrils.

She was starting to panic.

“I can’t make it stop,” she cried. It didn’t sound like her voice. More like a child. In that moment she felt a kinship for every young mage that had ever come into their power. This was much scarier than the bed. “I can’t make it stop!” She held her hands out toward him in the vain hope he could do something. This was his field, his specialty — he was the expert, not her. She hadn’t meant to do this at all.

It was very hot now.

“Solas,” warned Cassandra. She’d braced herself in a defensive stance; blindly reaching behind her for her bag. Or shield.

“She’s fine,” he soothed, “She’ll be fine — stay calm,” but he raised both his hands as he said it. In defence. In surrender. A submissive gesture that only served to kick up Ellana’s heartbeat that much faster — he’s afraid — and now the fire had climbed to her shoulders. The leather bracers began to crack and blister, and her hair curl. The smell turned her stomach.

Iron Bull cursed and scrambled to his feet. He took a step back. Fear was not something she’d seen often in the Qunari, but she knew him well enough to recognize it in his wide-eyed stare.

It was starting to hurt. The flame found the gaps in her armour and caught, tearing through the thin chemise and lashing across her skin. She hissed through clenched teeth. Cried out when one of the buckles became hot enough to brand a mark into her arm.

“You can stop this,” Solas instructed. It sounded like an order. He did not take another step toward her. “You control the spell, it does not control you — cut it off at its source and the flame will vanish. If you are powerful enough to summon it you can also dismiss it.”

She plead, “Solas,” and did not mean for it to sound like begging.

“Atisha, vhenan. Bre’odhea, em hartha—”

But she couldn’t. And she didn’t. The skin on her arms was starting to burn and peel.

She screamed.

There was a flurry of movement and a flash of light.

Cassandra turned and grabbed her sword, planted her feet in a wide-set stance, and then plunged it into the ground with a guttural shout.

The resulting shockwave blew out in all directions. Ellana heard the warp of the air when the wave of force hit her — felt it snap against her teeth.

And then everything stopped.
Translation:
"Atisha, vhenan. Bre’odhea, em hartha" = "Be calm, my love. Breathe deeply, listen to me"

Going back and reading comments and reviews are what kept me wanting to write. <3 for everyone who takes the time. It means the world.
So, a disclaimer is needed from here forward. This chapter would have come much faster, but not long after I posted part one I suffered a brain injury. I’m not, like, dead… obviously. But the circumstances were dire and it’s not the type of thing one gets over quickly. There are effects I feel daily, and finding words is sometimes really difficult. I go through periods where writing (and speaking) is very hard. Other times it seems pretty okay. I’m not sure if, or how, my writing has been impacted. Recovery is ongoing, but can take a long time. So if you notice a change in voice or style, that’s why.

I care about this story and I plan to keep writing it — I have an outline all the way to an epilogue. I’d like to get there. It just might take longer than I thought it would.

Thanks for sticking with this fic. Thanks for your comments on it. It keeps me thinking about it.

Coming back to consciousness after the shock was not the gentle, slow, transition of someone roused from sleep. Instead it was a violent awakening marked by gasping, heavy, breaths that ached of desperation. As though she’d been drowning and only just breached the water’s surface in time to save herself. And like a freezing river the air was too cold; too thick. It hurt to breathe it.

*Everything* hurt.

And her head was spinning.

*What happened?*

For a terrifying moment Ellana had no memory of what had led to her ending up this way, unable to so much as open her eyes to get a read on her surroundings.

Was she stunned? A fall? Had they been fighting? She couldn’t remember. Were there more enemies in the area? Did any remain? Were her friends in danger? *I can’t even move, how can I get us out of this?!*

Then something clicked and it all came back in a rush: the camp, the fire, Solas’ failed attempt to keep her focused. And, *oh*, she realized — this was not the work of a foe, but of Cassandra.

Though it had been said before she’d never really considered how a Seeker’s abilities were not that far removed from a Templar’s. While she’d rarely seen her use those skills on the battlefield — as they did not often find themselves cornered by groups of mages — she had fought alongside Cassandra enough times to recognize the move: it was a Spell Purge. And apparently she now had enough of a connection to the Fade for it to have a sizeable impact on her.

It could have been worse, she reasoned. She’d seen Cassandra deal significant damage to Venatori spellbinders — while this was barely more than a stun. She’d caused no serious injury with it, other than what she’d done to herself by falling, presumably. Though even that was more potent
than she’d have thought. More than the impact, it was the *emptiness* that hurt. Like she’d had her chest carved out and was trying to take a breath with the hollow left behind. Like she hadn’t eaten in weeks. A feeling that was distantly, painfully, familiar.

Not having any need to be the target herself she’d never had a reason to wonder what it felt like.

Here, now, she could only think of Solas recovering in his room after the ‘transference’ — sick and exhausted. Worse than she’d ever seen. And while she’d empathized at the time she also thought him being a little dramatic. Surely it could not be *so bad* to be made bereft of mana. From here forward she’d know better. The only thing felt more surely than her amazement at the move’s effectiveness was her desire to never again be on the receiving end of it.

Truly, this was a miserable experience.

And not one she’d care to dwell on any longer than she had to.

First things first: gather her wits.

*How long was I out?* Am I injured?

There was grass under her palms and the smell of wood ash in the air, but little else to help her orient herself. She might have tried to speak, but could not tell if the attempt was successful. The ringing in her ears had drown out everything else.

Next she tried to lift her head, though all that won her was a series of snaps and pops through her neck. Even the smallest movement took incredible strength; her body felt as though it was filled with sand. Like she’d been out *for hours*... though that couldn’t possibly be true. Even a powerful Purge couldn’t stun a mage for more than a moment.

*Does this make me a mage?*

The second attempt to call out was cut through by a strike of pain in her jaw when she opened it, but that was enough to startle a groan out of her. This time she was sure she’d made a noise: a rough, reedy, sound that she felt rather than heard.

There was movement.

Something shifted — and then suddenly it was easier to breathe. A wave of vertigo followed and it took another moment to gather her bearings enough to realize that had been caused by someone propping her up. There were fingers wrapped around the back of her neck, supporting her. Her head rest in the cup of a large, rough, palm.

It was Bull. Iron Bull was holding her.

Though it took considerable effort, she managed to open her eyes to confirm it. Blinking clear her vision until she could focus on his face. He was watching her; lone eye darting between hers, assessing. Expectant. As if he’d asked a question and was waiting on her reply.

But he didn’t seem too bothered by her silence, which she decided was a good sign.

Less good when he repeated the question and it became evident she was deafened.

He made two more attempts before it became clear the message wasn’t getting across. He’d have to try a different approach. He pointed at himself, his ear, then up, indicating a question.
Can you hear me?

Shaking her head felt like too much effort. Instead, she mumbled a reply that should have been, ‘no’ but came out more like, ‘nngh’.

Regardless, he understood. And with the slow, deliberate, movement of someone carefully conveying instructions Iron Bull raised a hand, pinched his nose between thumb and forefinger, closed his mouth, and mimed forcefully blowing out a breath. Then he gestured to her: your turn.

Cautiously, she did the same: lifted her impossibly heavy hand, held her nose, and blew. Hard.

There was a loud and intensely painful whine from somewhere deep inside her skull and then finally, mercifully, her ears popped. With the pressure equalized the headache all but disappeared, but the wave of sound that hit next was so jarring that she was forced to guard her ears against it lest she earn herself another.

Beyond the crackling fire, the creaking trees from a storm brewing, and the lingering whine of tinnitus one thing stood out above the noise: Cassandra and Solas were arguing. Loudly. She’d come into the middle of it.

“—it would have had!”

“The burns she sustained could take a week to fully heal for a fire that blazed for mere seconds. If you had waited that moment more how much worse would it have been?”

“The injuries are superficial. We’ve received the same at the hands of both demons and Venatori and walked away. Had you given me a chance to—”

Cassandra cut across him. “Do not try to tell me you had it under control, Solas.”

“I could have easily redirected the spell before it became dangerous,” he countered.

“It was already dangerous! A Purge does her no lasting harm.”

“Other than render her unconscious!”

“It was meant to! The fire needed to be dispelled immediately — and it was. This was hardly a serious blow. The flames did her far worse. You were also in its radius and were practically unaffected! She will be fine.”

“My ability to withstand the nullifying effects of Templars and their kin has been honed over years. She has no experience. Either with magic or Smiting! You have no way of knowing its impact on one only just coming into the skill. To Purge her without warning was akin to striking a child for stumbling. That was entirely unnecessary!”

“It very well may have saved her the use of her hands, and where would we be without the Anchor? I only regret that I did not do it sooner!”

They were just beyond the tents. A blur of wild gesture and angry pacing. The argument had been taken to the edge of camp rather than yelled over her, at least. Small blessings. Neither of them were known for backing down from a point; this could go on for hours.

Bull followed her gaze. “Yeah, they’ve been at it for a while,” he mused. “What about you? You good?”
He spoke softly, careful not to add to the cacophony, and when she looked back he offered her a thumbs up. She gave him the same in reply, though the gesture dragged out a wince and a hiss of pain. Her arms stung from fingertips to shoulders. Prickling not with the heat of blisters, but the stretch of new scars.

Turning her hands over showed her tender, pink, skin; freshly-knit and paper thin. Lighter where the downy hairs would yet grow back. Solas must have healed her wounds while she was out. Superficially, at least. The burns were deep, and would take several sessions to heal completely. She’d needed such treatment a few times before — it was never pleasant. The first days were the worst; when new skin was so delicate that even the most simple tasks caused pain, like donning armour or washing.

Gently, she ran her fingers up her arms, testing their sensitivity. Bare now: her bracers had been removed and the sleeves of the chemise beneath turned to ash. The edges black and scorched. A welt on the inside of her left elbow gave her pause. The scar left by a metal buckle when it was heated to scalding and burned through the strap. It hurt to touch, and she winced as her fingertips felt around the raised, uneven, edges. Even with a dozen healing sessions this would leave a permanent mark. A brand to forever remember the night she caught fire.

Cassandra and Solas were both right: she’d been burned before — but never this badly.

Bull was still waiting on a proper answer. So, “I’m good,” she affirmed in a voice more suited to grinding rocks than speaking.

He looked her up and down and his mouth twisted a little. He said, “You gonna puke? Smites always make ‘em puke. You look like you’re gonna puke.”

“No.” Ellana shook her head. Then immediately wished she hadn’t. The vertigo surged to a crescendo and his face spun. “Wait… actually yes.”

In one fluid movement Bull managed to flip her onto her side with one hand and gather up her hair with the other, ensuring she did not splash it with sick. When the nausea passed he braced a hand against her back and gently pushed so she could sit up and take a proper breath.

He patted her shoulder. “Dalish has been training with some of the ex-Templars that joined up with the soldiers. Practicing taking Smites and Purges. Wants to get a handle on what it feels like. She still pukes about half the time. Passes out the rest.” Wistfully he added, “I’ve earned so many sovereigns off that bet.”

Ellana wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Pity she doesn’t have a barrier she can raise to help mitigate that effect.”

His brow quirked. “From her—?”

“From her bow.”

“Maybe you can practice with her,” he advised, only half-joking. A folded kerchief was pulled from his pocket, offered with the suggestion.

She took both. “Could make it into a club. Non-magic-users meeting up on Tuesdays to get our not-mana not-Purged.” She spit into the grass. Her mouth tasted of bile and her voice was still barely above a whisper.

“Come to think of it it’s a little weird there’s two of you now.”
“Just need one more for a full set.”

“You joke,” he warned, “but the way Dagna’s been talking about the runes she’s been working on lately has me wondering.”

“Inquisitor!”

Solas was at her side before she could think to reply, Cassandra a step behind him, the pair having finally stopped arguing long enough to notice she’d come around. She was armed now with her sword in its scabbard and her shield on her back. One hand ready on the pommel. Just in case. She rarely strayed far from her weapon, even at rest, but this readiness was a testament to how uneasy the situation had made her. It was rare to see her so tense.

She did not join Solas at her side.

“She’s alright,” Bull was saying, “Right, boss?”

In a dusty croak, “‘es,” Ellana managed, then cleared her throat so she could pitch her voice louder and sound less like the dead when she did so. “Yes, I’m fine. Just a little disoriented.” The feeling was starting to return to her legs and arms; they weren’t as heavy as they had been a moment past. Still sore. That was likely to last a while. If she didn’t know better she’d have guessed she collided with a charging druffalo instead of a Seeker.

Solas’ eyes slid from hers to the puddle of sick in the grass. “That will pass,” he assured, “The effects of mana drain are uncomfortable, but should be only temporary. Do you feel hurt beyond the burns on your arms?”. The weight of his brow when his eyes scanned her body, flicking only briefly toward her middle, asked a different question.

But before she could reply, “I did not Smite her,” corrected Cassandra. Not entirely without malice. There was a bite to her tone that implied they’d already had this argument. “Had I, you would know. She’d have taken serious damage. A Spell Purge only affects magic being channelled, be it by glyph or caster, as you well know.”

“For a young mage there’s barely a difference between the two,” he snapped back.

“She is neither young nor a mage!”

“Not in practice, no! But these abilities surfacing now are not unlike—!”

“That’s enough.” Ellana cut through before they could start up again. Bull offered her an arm so she might use it to pull herself to her feet. Still unsteady, but not so much so that she’d accept Solas’ hand as well. “Both of you stop it.”

She addressed each in turn. “Cassandra—” The Seeker lifted her chin, bracing herself. Her surprise evident when it was not criticism, but praise, that followed. “Thank you. Your quick thinking prevented things from spiralling even further out of control. And while I’m not thrilled to be on the receiving end of your abilities, it did what it was meant to. It worked. It was overkill — but it worked.”

The hard line of her shoulders relaxed just a little, and she inclined her head in acknowledgement.

Next, “Solas,” she continued, “Though I appreciate the concern, it’s not necessary. I’m fine — she did not hurt me in any meaningful capacity. Additionally, you are just as capable of Dispelling, and to my knowledge your method is more targeted and so less likely to cause any physical harm. Should the need arise to use it again — and I sincerely hope it does not — do not hesitate. Better to
be weakened than injured. Weakness will pass unaided.”

Even if she did not know him well enough to anticipate his reaction to a judgement he disagreed with, his body language made it abundantly clear how he felt. She could see every clever retort and damning argument he held beneath his tongue. The knot in his brow. A twitch at the corner of his mouth.

Bull’s eye flicked between the two of them.

But, ultimately, he squared his jaw and, “By your order, Inquisitor,” he replied. Electing instead to convey his frustration with a hard gaze held a moment longer than deference would allow.

“Thank you,” she muttered — and meant it. Quarrelling with him was draining enough on their own; having an audience would not improve the experience. “I cannot take another minute of your shouting, my head is ringing like a bell.”

She ran her fingers up over the top of her head, through her hair, wincing when her nails caught on knots beneath her ears and pulled. It was a mess. And probably full of burrs and sticks after lying on the ground for a spell. But when a few tugs failed to loosen the tangles she brought a lock forward for a better look.

It wasn’t knots.

“Your armour caught fire just before you lost consciousness,” offered Cassandra solemnly, to the question yet unasked. “It went out by the time you hit the ground, but had already burned hot enough to destroy some of it… as well as catch some of your underclothes and your hair.”

It was impossible to gauge the full extent of the damage without a looking glass. A hand skimmed down the back of her head told her equally little. The ends of her hair felt sticky and thin. Uneven. Little pieces curled at odd angles and stuck together where the layers of wax and polish had melted off the leather, then dried while she was on the ground.

“How bad is it?”

“You will need new vambraces and pauldrons made. We discarded what was left of them to get a better look at your arms. Unfortunately, some parts of your hair stuck to the leather or burned up. Some is still attached to your cuirass and can be cut away, but Solas advised against taking the rest of your armour off until you woke so he could better assess any burns beneath it.”

“If they extend that far I would see to them treated carefully,” Solas clarified, “So not to put you at risk of infection. We have only the one healing potion among us to last through tomorrow, and minimal bandages, we will need to rely on practical medicine until we reach Skyhold and have a proper healer see to you.”

A sensible precaution. Convenient, for providing good reason not to reveal the bindings she wore beneath her clothes. There would be no excusing the bump they only barely hid. It was a wonder she’d gotten away with it this long.

Cassandra continued, “From what I could see, the rest of your armour seems salvageable. Your hair… less so.” Her eyes traced a path around her head, shoulder to shoulder.

“It’s not so bad,” Bull added, “Once you even it out it’ll be fine. I’m sure there’s someone in Skyhold whose skilled with a pair of shears. Maybe ask Cullen where he gets his done.”

“So I can get the points of my ears nicked?” Humans didn’t even leave their ears in tact in their
artwork. Elven features had no business being around their sharp things. “It’s fine. It’s just hair. I
had too much of it anyway.”

It was not quite a lie, she’d not been precious about it since childhood, but something about the
loss of it left an ache in her chest. *One more thing* among so many others wrest from her grasp.
Everything that made her who she was had been taken. Her language, her family, her culture, her
gods, her Vallaslin and body… and now even her hair. Rarely did she spend the time to tame it —
and often lamented it — but in truth the unruliness of it was the last shred of personal identity
she’d managed to preserve. It was the only part of her, here, that could not be fundamentally
changed to fit another’s standards. Braided and bowed, perhaps, but still a piece of the wilderness
she left behind. Even the clothes she wore, fine though they were, seemed to belong to someone
else. A wardrobe not made for a Dalish hunter, but for the image — the *story* — of civility and
power that was *The Inquisitor*. An idea she was moulded to fit, piece by piece, until
unrecognizable to her former self.

*It will grow back*, she told herself, *it will grow back. It’s not important.*

A hush had settled over the camp. Guilty eyes watching as her fingers explored the ragged ends of
what remained of her hair. The longer it stretched on the more sure she was that the stinging in her
eyes would turn to proper tears. It was too easy to cry these past few months; her emotions always
ran so high, now.

*Damn this.*

She needed an escape.

She needed to be alone.

She said, “If it’s all the same to you I’d like to take dawn’s watch and sleep this off.”

The exit should have been stoic and confident, but she was not strong enough to hide completely
the catch in her breath. Or the way her voice rose, just a little, at the end. It was a vain hope that if
any noticed they would politely pretend they hadn’t. Let her go in peace to her tent and mope about
with her childish grief.

Instead, she made it only four steps toward it before something else stopped her.

“You should not sleep alone!”

Of all the interruptions she’d thought might befall her, that had not been among them.

The nights were chilly but they were still a few weeks off of being cold enough to require doubling
up. Though that was clearly not the point Cassandra had intended to make.

Slowly — curiously — Ellana turned back around. “I’m sorry?”

At first she could only stammer, wholly unprepared to finish whatever thought she’d begun, while
the pink in her cheeks grew slowly redder. It was enough of a struggle that it could almost be said
one might actually see the words physically slipping from her grasp.

Once she finally found them it all came out in a rush: “Someone should be with you. Through the
night. In case it happens again. If you lack the ability to control this power you also lack the
foresight to anticipate a surge of it, and so should not be left alone. Solas, myself, or Bull can—”

“No,” the Qunari said flatly. Then, to Ellana, “No offence, boss.”
“None taken.”

“—keep you under guard to ensure quick action, if needed. If you are planning to retire now you will be up before the dawn, and will be taking Solas’ usual place at watch. We still have a few hours before the rotation begins, and neither of you sleep as long as we do — if Solas takes the watch before yours I can take the first by the fire and be ready to switch off by the time he wakes. You’ll not go without a guard capable of nullifying a spell. Provided he sleeps with you now.”

For the space of several breaths the silence was deafening.

Then, “Falls asleep,” she clarified, unnecessarily. “In your tent. We would be splitting our sleeping hours to facilitate it.”

It was not a terrible idea — just poorly communicated. And poorly timed: she’d have rather spent the hours in solitude.

It took a moment to sort out the timing in her head but, “Alright,” Ellana agreed, and turned to Solas. “Does that work for you?”

“I see no problems with it. We will be tired, come tomorrow evening, but at our current pace we’ll reach Skyhold before then. It should not be an issue.” Ever the pragmatist.

“Fantastic. You can play nursemaid first, then.” With a wide sweep of her arm she gestured for him to go on ahead of her. After you. He did so, stopping only to pick up his bag and bedroll first.

As the tent flap closed behind her she could have sworn she heard Bull whisper to his fellow warrior a quiet, “Subtle.”

Inside, Solas had wasted no time and immediately set to work laying out bandages and herbs atop his unfolded bedroll. The supply was supplemented by elfroot and blood lotus they’d gathered earlier that morning. Proper reagents were limited on social journeys, but there were enough raw ingredients to make a poultice to soothe her wounds. She’d need it. She could feel the heat beneath the edges of her armour where fire had seeped in and lashed across her skin.

But before that, the tent offered enough privacy for him to safely ask the question he’d been waiting to from the start: “How is—?”

“Fine,” she answered, before he could finish. “Didn’t much care for the fall, I think; quite a bit of movement since then.”

His relief was palpable. The tension in his shoulders loosed along with the breath he’d been holding. It would be endearing on any other day. “That is good to hear.”

“Affairs in the Circles were not exactly uncommon,” she noted while unbuckling the straps of her cuirass, “and I’m sure mages there have withstood far worse than I just did on a regular basis while carrying—” She stopped. Considered. Then pitched her voice low enough not to carry beyond his ears. “—carrying children.”

Finished with his preparation, he cautiously moved to help her undress. Stopping just shy of touching her until she nodded her consent. Taking her cue, “I imagine they have,” he returned in a whisper. “But I would be hesitant to trust any practical wisdom gleaned from the imprisonment and torture of mages. Knowing something is survivable is not the same as it having no impact. Additionally, your situation is very different; you have a dependancy on magical affinity that others do not. There is no precedence for it in this era. Purging you of the mana you now have — even momentarily — could have been catastrophic. We are fortunate it was not. Raise your arms.”
When the last buckle was undone he peeled the leather armour away from her singed undergarments, careful not to drag it across her skin. She could feel the ends of her hair tearing away with it. Fused to the melted layers of oil and wax just as Cassandra had said.

She tried to imagine it wasn’t as bad as it felt.

The chemise went next. Soot-stained and burned beyond repair. He eased it over her head, then positioned himself cross-legged behind her, supplies laid out at his side. The beginnings of a healing ritual they’d performed dozens of times on the road.

“You are being unfair to Cassandra,” she said as she braced herself for the sting once he unwrapped her breast-band. “She knows nothing more than what I’ve told her and was acting on a duty to protect me. To protect all of us. Her caution is— ah! Shit!”

Once dressed down to nothing but her bindings the spread of the burns was painfully apparent. Though the fire had only seared beneath her armour a mere moment before being dispelled, it was hot, and quick, and that was enough. A line of shining red stretched across her chest, shoulder to shoulder, sprayed with blisters. Skin split and wept where the buckles and grommets had rest. Burned straight through the thin undergarments. She was left with a seared shadow shaped by the outline of the leather vest.

Her breasts were spared by virtue of the linen band she wore to bind them. It provided just enough of a buffer to protect her from a worse burn.

Good fortune, as they were soon to become much more important to her.

She hissed a breath through clenched teeth as the last of the bands and binding fell away. The feel of cold air hitting her wounds was not as comforting as she’d hoped.

A hand touched upon her back, and from it she felt a pulse of familiar magic wash over her. Taking the worst of the heat — and the wounds — with it when it faded. Though it was soothing, and she sighed with relief, still, “Save your mana and use a salve,” she advised. “I don’t want you tapped in case this happens again.”

“It will not. You will not be capable of casting again for some time.”

“Just like I wasn’t capable of casting something powerful enough do harm beyond the bedsheets?”

It was petty. She didn’t care.

Careful hands paused their work. “You are angry with me,” Solas concluded. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes!” she bit. Then, “No,” she corrected, in a softer whisper. Sighed. “A little. I’m… I’m upset that the expectations you set regarding these abilities were low enough that I was taken completely by surprise. You told me it was impossible and I believed you. I was frightened when that was proven wrong, and due to that I was harmed — other people could have been harmed as well. I very nearly hurt you. And you could have eased that by preparing me for this possibility rather than convincing me it couldn’t happen.”

“I did not ‘convince’ you,” he argued. “I did not believe it was likely at the time.” As if there was a vast difference between the two. As if he did not know she had, like so many times before, taken him at his word.

“Really? Because you sounded very sure that first afternoon.”
His dour expression was writ into every word; she did not need to see his face to know it. “Evidently your capabilities have grown since then. I did not suspect it would happen so quickly.”

He was ever so good at dancing around a point.

“No reason to discuss the possibility with me, you mean.”

With a weary sigh, he braced one hand on the back of her shoulder and dug into his bag with the other. “Given that early spell-casting is often heralded by emotional distress, something you are already prone to in your condition, it would have been extraordinarily unwise to provoke it.” A small ceramic jar with a tightly-fit lid was pulled from a pocket. From it he scraped the last dregs of a healing balm onto his fingertips. “What would you have had me do instead? List for you a series of worst cases wherein you are consumed by your own rogue spells? To what end? All mages possess the power to destroy: magic can be a weapon just as sure as any blade. But like a knife it can also be a tool when wielded with care. It is better not to develop a fear of those capabilities. Had you stayed calm you would not have lost control the way you did this evening, and instead been able to discover your power gradually over time.”

“So you just decided it was better not to tell me what you knew I was capable of?”

“At the time you were already agitated. And you have remained uncomfortable with the idea since.” He made it sound like a curse — as though her trepidation had personally wronged him. “I chose to spare you information that would only make that discomfort worse.”

“And in doing so you deliberately created a situation where my ignorance put me at risk. You don’t get to make that choice for me!”

They were past whispers now — she had not meant to raise it to a shouting match. As angry as she was a part of her still knew that this would not be resolved by brow-beating him for his arrogance. The hush that fell upon the camp shamed her, too. Their companions by the fire outside having abruptly stopped talking once she started yelling.

It took an embarrassingly long time for them to start back up again.

Solas quieted too. Waiting until after she’d taken some time to breathe before his hands touched her again, and resumed treatment. He passed the jar over her shoulder so she could apply the salve to her chest while he finished with the wounds she could not reach.

It was a while before he spoke again.

When he did, “I’m sorry,” he said simply.

She wanted to push him for more. For something more substantial than an apology for the presumption that he alone could craft her experience. A deeper awareness of how he’d lied by omission or talked in circles, and the broken trust between them it would inevitably lead to if he didn’t learn to trust her. This was far from the first time he’d withheld something over the belief that he knew best if and when to disseminate the knowledge.

But this could be enough for now. She was too tired to argue, and there were good intentions somewhere in the mess.

She placed the empty salve on the ground next to her. “Beyond us… I am the Inquisitor, and you are a member of my Inquisition. You cannot decide for me what I should or should not know. That is not up to you. You are not my Keeper. If you have insight, share it. If it’s upsetting, so be it; I will deal with that separately. But you cannot withhold information simply because you believe I
cannot handle it or do not need it, especially over things that could have a direct impact on my well-being. I cannot pass judgement on a matter I only partially understand, Solas.” She turned just enough to look over her shoulder. To meet his eye and properly read his expression; be it acceptance or dismissal. It read as neither, but that was better than opposition. “I need to be prepared for all possibilities — even if they are ‘unlikely’. Do not make decisions for me again.”

He was silent a long time.

Considering the words as an order and weighing it against the value of what knowledge he still had yet to share.

*There will always be more.*

But it seemed to reach him. After a time, he quietly offered more. “You will be at the same risk of any young mage — most notably in times of turmoil. Fear or anxiety. But the better you learn mental discipline, the less likely you are to lose control. If you fight against it you will only end up hurting yourself. Practicing with offensive spells — even just redirecting or blocking the energy aimed at you — would improve your command of magic. If not with me, then with others, as we’ve discussed. What you demonstrated this evening was a level of command I did not expect to see for several more months of training, at least. Your aura has changed since we last attempted practice: it is stronger, and lingers. I’m still unsure if you will ever gain the proficiency of a born mage, but I am confident it will grow from here.”

She tried not to latch onto the admission that he’d always known it would evolve this far. They would just go in circles.

Instead, “Thank you,” she said. And meant it. “You’re right: I’m not terribly excited about the pace, but at least I know what I can expect.” This was a better place to end it on, for now. Some levity might even improve the chill. With that in mind she amended, “Anything else I should watch out for? Spontaneous combustion? Templars appearing in my bedroom? Assassination plots?”

But he did not take the opportunity she’d offered. Instead, he hesitated.

Not for long. But enough time for the smile to leave her face… and a heaviness settle in her stomach.

He pressed his mouth into a thin line; searching for t words. After a moment his eyes flicked back to hers. “Your nightmares,” he said at last. “They have been worse lately — more frequent. Have they not?”

They rarely shared a bed, either in Skyhold or on the road. Those nights they spent in each other’s company were short and sweet: he usually left before she fell asleep. Only rarely did he stay part of the night, usually to bide time to avoid passing others in the halls when he returned to his room. There was no opportunity to watch over her rest, and she’d not mentioned any dreams to him since they fought in the library nearly a year past.

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you looking in on me while I sleep?”

The answer was immediate. “No. I would not do that without your permission. However, I can hear you. I am aware of your presence, while you dream, and if you are distressed it leaves an echo in the Fade. An impression on the surroundings —similar to how areas that have seen strife will preserve a memory of it. Curious spirits, and demons, are drawn to that unrest. Twice I have seen you wake cold from a sleep you later described as troubled. This can be a sign of an incursion. The Anchor already makes you a beacon in the Fade, this development will only made that target more
attractive."

“You think something pursues me?”

“Or influences you,” he proposed. “It is possible for lesser demons — Terror or Despair — to incubate nightmares in the mind of a mage in the hope of weakening them for possession. To the inexperienced it takes very little to plant a seed, and without forewarning their temptation may simply take the form of a reprieve offered from a rash of nightmares. They will prey on worries; fears and doubt. Thoughts that plague you in your waking hours. Spin them into something more. Are your dreams often the same?”

It was unsettling to think of herself as a mage — or the predecessor of one, perhaps — wandering the Fade while she slept. Now a target of other powers. She would have no idea how to fight the influence of something that came looking for nourishment in her nightmares. “I’m not sure,” Ellana answered honestly. “I don’t often recall them after I wake. All I remember are feelings: the cold, hunger, fear. Being alone. Or trapped, maybe. Wolves howling.”

His gaze was sharp. “Did you have them before the Anchor?”

“I don’t think so. If I did, it was rare. Now it seems they happen all the time.” Several times a week, at worst. Steadily increasing as she progressed further through her pregnancy. She’d not thought too deeply on them, big dreams were always said to be a typical part of the experience.

“You must take better care not to make yourself a target,” he said. The warning was chiding but his expression was soft when he gave it.

She gave him a look. “You’ve said so before”.

“And it is no less true now than it was then,” he replied, but winced for the memory.

“If only I had half your proficiency, surely this would be an easy task. As it stands I’m not sure how one does or doesn’t do so.”

As if it were so simple as thinking positively.

There wasn’t much more that could be done for her wounds now that she’d asked he not rely on magic to close them. The jar of salve was empty, and what was left of the bandages were on her chest, held in place by the breast-band when Solas re-wrapped it.

For bed, she’d left a spare undershirt on the bedroll when she’d set up her tent earlier in the day — now her only one. Carefully, she slipped it over her head. Sleeping nude would be preferable for the wounds to breathe, had she the option, but it was far too cold. Even if he warmed her bed that night.

Only once she dug her fingers into her hair to split it into thirds for braiding did she remember the damage it’d sustained. All of the pieces were different lengths now. “Shit,” she swore under her breath. She gave it a valiant effort, but the gumption didn’t get her far before frustration took its place.

Solas pulled a small hunting knife from his belt. Rarely used and razor sharp, the low lantern light glinted off the blade as he raised it up. “I can help you,” he said. And at first it was unclear if he was speaking of her dreams or her hair. Regardless, she nodded, and turned her back to him again.

With the practiced ease of someone who had performed the task a hundred times before, he wound locks of hair through the fingers of one hand to find an even length, then pulled it taut. The blade
cut clean through. She could feel what was left behind spring free and bounce about her neck.

He said, “Should you permit me, I can walk with you in a dream; assist in redirecting it toward something less… upsetting. At the very least it might dissuade anything that would be looking to take advantage of you.”

She brushed the stray hairs from her chest and legs, watching as they fell into little piles on the floor. So much after only a few cuts. At least a handbreadth of length — gone. Maybe more. All cast about on the floor of the tent in a growing halo around her. A mix of tight curls and looser waves, burned at the edges and stuck together.

There might not even be enough to braid after this.

“Alright,” she agreed, and tried not to let the grief show in her voice.

They fell into a more companionable silence as he worked. Fingers gently carding through her hair to find the edges. A small comfort in an otherwise somber act. For a time she allowed her eyes to slip closed; focus on that touch, taking from it what solace she could find.

When she opened them again the oil lantern had burned low enough to bathe the tent in a soft, warm, glow. The light picking highlights from the fallen curls. Reds and golds in deep brown. Bright, like they might burst into flame all on their own.

Delicately, she plucked one from the ground by her knee. Rubbing it between a thumb and forefinger to separate it into individual hairs. Feeling the texture on her skin. Softer now than it ever had been. Months of regular baths and oiling had done it almost as much good as proper eating. She let it go, to fall back upon the floor, and the image evoked an old memory. A longing she had not felt in an age.

*A stolen knife too big for little hands. Tangled locks of hair spread all about the ground — falling off rocks and into rushing water to be swept away. A spray of colour from the setting sun beyond the trees. Cold toes and bare feet. Slivers and blisters. Shame like a knot in her gut, and the stubborn refusal to cry at the laughter.*

The curls were falling on her hands now. Between her fingers.

“What about Collette?” she said suddenly. “For a girl.”

Solas’ hands stuttered, but paused only a moment to consider. Then he pulled another weft taut and cut through, slower this time. Gently brushing the debris from her shoulder.

“That does not sound like an Elvish name.”

It shouldn’t have made her laugh, but it was hard not to find it funny. They had never before discussed the topic — a lapse that was surely in need of remedy soon — but for all his restraint in answering the quiet disapproval may have well been a firm and resounding ‘no’. Of course he’d favour tradition.

“That’s because it isn’t. It’s a human name. Orlesian, I think. To be honest I’m not even sure what it means. I’ve just always thought it was pretty.”

Anyone else might have left it there — a sweet suggestion, good as any other, offered and forgotten just as quickly — but he knew her better. Melancholy was not so easily hid from one who knew your heart.
When she didn’t offer more on her own, gently, he pushed. “Where did you hear it?”

There was so little she’d told him — told anyone — of her earliest years. Of the loneliness, and a
yearning knit deeply into the life of a foundling grafted upon a clan. Like the last stem of a dying
oak cut and tied to a nurse tree and begged to thrive, she never quite fit with the rest. Even in
growth, over years and decades, her roots did not reach the ground. Just slightly out of step.

It was not a lack of trust, nor care, that stilled her tongue — but habit. Self-preservation. An armour
of distance she’d forged from necessity. Up until now no one had needed to know. No one had
wanted to. Those few she grew close to within her clan were already witness to her youth, and
those beyond were denied the privilege by virtue of being outsiders. Solas asked little of her past,
though he made no secret of his curiosity. Near as eager to hear her stories as he was to share his
own, regardless of how inconsequential. Regardless of how Dalish, even — he’d made an effort to
quell his prejudice. Still, he was respectful of the boundaries she’d set, even if she’d not expressly
asked it of him. Presuming the topic was a sensitive one.

It was… strange. Being in a position where she knew more about his early life than he did of hers,
considering how much he had to tell by comparison. Stranger still to consider there would be mere
months left before they both participated in forming another’s.

“I saw a little girl once,” she began, "in the market in Wycome. Because Keeper Deshanna looked
after me, I would accompany her whenever she took the trips. It was not long after I’d come to the
clan — I was young, but not so much so that I could not be tasked to help with the supplies.
Members of the clan would trade in the city regularly. That particular day she was cross with me
over… something. I do not recall what. But I was incensed enough to slip away from her not long
after we arrived, and she did not go searching for me.”

He almost interrupted to ask a question then. She heard the little intake of breath and the parting of
lips, before he thought better of it, and let her continue. “I was known to run off — but I always
found my way back,” she amended, and that seemed to satisfy him. Continuing, “Somehow I made
it all the way into the high market, where they sold silks and wine. Where elves did not go. The
people there were all dressed so extravagantly I thought they deserved their pockets picked, and so
was sneaking through the shadows and empty stalls trying to lift a purse. It’s fortunate I didn’t get
the chance to try, as I’m sure they’d have shown me no leniency, had I been caught.

“Then I saw this girl. Human, no older than I was, with lovely blonde hair I was fascinated with. I
remember staring at her a long time thinking that hair like that must never get tangled or frizzy…
With all her fineries she must have someone to brush and style it for her every day. But it was more
than just that: she was very pretty. Skin soft as a peach and hair like gold. No scars and bruises on
her arms or dirt on her shoes. Dimples in her cheeks and all. And her—”

The tale was stalled by a lump in her throat. A bruise forming around a word that suddenly hurt to
think. Worse to speak. An old pain that had always been there, somewhere in the background, but
never quite so sharp as it was in this telling.

She’d not noticed her hand had come to rest upon the swell of her stomach, now unbound, until his
slid over it. Entwined his fingers with hers. Squeezed, gently, as he pulled her back to rest upon his
chest. Somehow she was all the more vulnerable for it. Lying near-naked in the arms of a man she
loved in a threadbare tent not made to share, cradling a body swollen with a child they’d never
intended and yet…

Safe.

She breathed. And though her eyes pricked with unshed tears, pushed forward. “—And her
mother… just as lovely, began to stroke her hair. Weave her fingers through it, idly, while she spoke to a vendor. It was such a precious scene, and I thought it must be so terribly soft for her mother to want to touch it so fondly. Not at all like mine. Then she kissed the top of her head, called her, ‘Collette’, and finished with their sale. I thought: ‘what a beautiful name to match’.

“When I returned home and shared this story with another, she and several other children convinced me that if I cut off all my hair and tossed it into the sea it would grow back gold and silken just like that girl’s. I imagined myself returning to the camp triumphant with my golden crown like a queen’s and become the most beautiful child in the clan. Instead, I came back late for dinner looking like a spring sheep that ran off mid-shear.”

It should have made her laugh: it was funny… wasn’t it? A charming anecdote of puckish mischief and childish naivety that left her hair cropped nearly to the scalp, her head covered in cuts; a mess.

“It was a year before it grew back long enough for them to stop laughing.”

Through the tale he held her; his arms encircled round her waist and his chin upon her shoulder. He lifted a hand from her swollen belly and very softly — very deliberately — combed his fingers through her hair. Over and over again. She could say it was a final check for singed ends he’d missed until he tucked the little curl from her temple behind an ear. The way he often did when they laid together.

He was so awfully fond it.

“Was this the only other time you cut it?” he asked. And at her nod, whispered, “It will grow back.”

_I know_, she wanted to reply, but instead said nothing. Fighting in stubborn silence against the pain in her chest. Trying not to linger on how quickly he’d found the bruise right where it bloomed.

Then he smiled — she could feel it against her cheek when he placed a kiss there. Hear it in his voice. But it was not of pity, as she had thought to receive, that he spoke. “The name is lovely, as you said. However, there is one other problem with it beyond its Orlesian origins.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m afraid that it is unlikely a child of ours will be blonde.”

This time, the laughter — and the tears — were not so terrible. Before she could even bring a hand to hide them he took her by the chin and kissed them away.
The rest of the journey back to Skyhold was uneventful.

No bandits, thieves, or rifts blocked their way; and they passed no others on the road. Even idle chatter was unusually low, with passing comments on the time left or plans of the coming weeks the only topics they visited. And then only just to fill the silence. It was hardly peaceful.

Iron Bull typically told tale of fights, glory, and questionable anatomical accuracy but those stories were conspicuously absent this time. Instead of his usual crooked grin he wore a pensive frown, and the deep lines in his forehead told of a burden of thoughts too heavy to share, even as the hours without meaningful conversation approached unbearable. Those few smiles he offered were kind enough, but lacked the sparkle that would make them true. The events of the previous evening had unsettled him in a way he did not often show: the late birth of a mage was virtually unheard of. The potential worried him more than that of a child coming into their power. Though he said nothing more on the subject, he kept a watchful eye on her throughout the day. His mind working in the quiet — trying to unravel the mystery she’d become.

Cassandra, too, travelled in stoic silence broken only to suggest the odd break when the signs of Ellana’s discomfort became too much to bear. The Herald did not need to voice any complaints aloud, as her grinding teeth and jerky pace spoke well enough on their own.

Beneath the armour she was deeply uncomfortable. Itching, sore, and healing spells or salve only went so far. Every step she took rubbed seams against skin either raw, or new, which either way felt like a rake of claws. Thicker bandages might have helped, but without the freedom to doff her armour and change the soiled wrappings, lest the others get an early glimpse of what lay beneath, she was miserable. By the time they reached the gatehouse mid-afternoon she would have killed a man for the opportunity to get out of her clothes.

The others might have sensed that she stood on the precipice of violence, as they scattered almost immediately upon arrival. Cassandra and Bull to the Herald’s Rest for a hot meal, and Solas to tend to whatever it was that had his tongue all day. He’d barely spoken a word in hours. Lost in thought, he didn't even offer a goodbye before wandering off in the direction of the rotunda.

She did not begrudge any of them their quick exits — on the contrary: she was delighted by the opportunity. It left her free to return to her room, call for a tub of water, bar the door, and spend the next hour in blissful solitude scrubbing away the layers of sweat and blisters she’d acquired from the road.

A hot bath was a luxury she only rarely enjoyed in her old life with the Dalish. Once or twice a year, mostly in her youth, a small group of friends would pool together enough coin to afford several nights in a shared room at one of the few inns that welcomed elves. They would take turns ordering pitchers of boiling water and scented oils and return to the clan days later — hungover, poor, and scrubbed raw.

Here, as the Inquisitor, there was less alcohol involved but the bath experience was even better. The slow sink into a warm copper tub dashed with salts and buttery soaps was a decadence she’d come to appreciate even more than a soft bed or the array of dinner options offered by the kitchen. Nothing was sweeter after a long journey… except perhaps sharing it with her lover.
But she’d made no plans to leave her room unless forced, and so did not see any of her companions again that day.

Following the absolutely divine soak she was so exhausted she laid down for a short nap and ended up sleeping straight through until the next morning. The night was dreamless and peaceful. Clearly she’d needed the rest, and so was grateful to have it, but it was miraculous (and slightly suspect) that no one had come to her door before then. Instead, Solas woke her. Arriving at first light with a basket of buttered bread and a cup of tea he’d talked the handmaid out of.

Herbal, mild, and honey-sweet, the drink was not a flavour she normally cared for, but she’d come to enjoy the ritual of drinking it more than the taste. Taking breakfast together in the tower room was becoming perilously close to routine now that she could enjoy the meal.

“She’s not the brightest girl,” Ellana said upon receipt of the pilfered food. It was still warm from the oven. “But if you keep this up she may come to wonder if you haven’t taken an interest in me.”

Solas had laid down next to her on the bed, propping himself up on an elbow. “Do you not often take company in your room?” he countered easily. He tore off a small hunk of bread for himself before she’d downed it all. “You hold conversations in here frequently — one more would hardly be suspect. Additionally, you spend most of your afternoons at work at your desk and so are regularly brought both food and letters directly.”

Such practiced misdirection. “You’ve thought about this,” she replied around a mouthful. He smiled. “It would only arouse suspicion if my behavior differs from others’.”

“Ah, but they all tend to leave within the hour. Whereas you stay for several, if not longer.”

“As do Dorian and Sera, when they visit. Josephine as well.” He paused for thought — and a bite — tapping a finger against his lips. “But that aside, they do not leave the same way I do.”

“Which is how?”

Dryly, “Carefully,” he replied.

She laughed, nearly choked, and grabbed the tea to aid her. Managing a strained, “Point taken,” between swallows. When she could, she continued, “Speaking of gatherings, once Vivienne returns next week I was planning on bringing everyone in here to tell them. You’re coming too.”

That charming smile was gone now.

“That hardly seems necessary. There is nothing I can learn from this meeting and the announcement doesn’t require my input. My time would be better spent elsewhere.”

“Doing what?”

The answer was too quick to be spontaneous. “Research into the shards. Reading the tomes that came in from Tevinter while we were in Orlais. At some point I’d also planned on finishing the fresco of the attempt on the Empress’ life — the preliminary sketch has been laid out for months.” He’d thought about this, too.

She gave him a look. “You just don’t want to be present when I tell everyone we’ve been sleeping together.”

To his credit, he managed to suppress the reflexive denial on his tongue. Getting as far as parted
lips before he stopped himself, pressed his mouth thin, and conceded her point with a subtle nod. “I will admit it is not something I am looking forward to,” he said with care. “However, my point still stands: my inclusion serves no purpose — it is a distraction at best.”

“Good try,” she replied, and took a last sip of tea before replacing the cup and saucer on the nightstand. “But you’re acting as moral support. This isn’t for you it’s about you — in part, anyway. I want you there. Besides, you owe it to me: I didn’t request your presence when I told my advisors so showing up this time is quite literally the least you can do.”

“Attending that meeting would have been equally as pointless. You were — and remain — perfectly capable of making an announcement on your own.”

They’d danced this number before. She was unmoved. “Then you owe it to me for seducing me in the first place.”

“As I recall it was your overtures that ultimately led to my spending the night with you.”

“You kissed me first,” she countered.

The attempt to curb his amusement was abysmal. “I was not aware we were keeping score.”

“I absolutely forbid you from weaselling out of this.”

Pulling rank was a cheap ploy to tip the argument in her favour, but it felt excusable in this instance. Solas was proud — private — and the announcement would leave him open to a level of scrutiny he’d prefer to handle on his own terms. He wasn’t going to volunteer unless she twisted his arm.

And twist it she had.

Deeply, he sighed. Resigned. She’d won now and they both knew it. “As you wish.”

“Good,” she said. Sharply, so the finality was clear, but with enough of a curl to her lips to convey that the pique was mostly theatre. “If there is any discomfort to be had over this experience you are going down with me.”

For that he plucked the last piece of bread from the basket and popped it into his mouth before she could snatch it back. Smiling when she flashed him an absolutely rancorous look for his blatant thievery. He said, “If it is the burden of mockery you’re hoping to share, I can assure you it will make no difference whether I am present or not. Those with the penchant for it will not be so quick to leave it at the door.”

The subtle, sour, note in his voice hinted of some experience with the matter. And there was only one person she could think of who had both the information and the disposition to harass him.

She grinned. “Has Leliana been bothering you lately, Solas?”

The glare that followed might have been intended to convey the weight of his displeasure, but succeeded only in making his exasperation that much funnier.

“She is insufferable.”

It was the gravity in his voice that really sold it.

Ellana coughed to stifle a giggle. “What has she done now?”
“Most recently? There was a scroll case waiting on my desk when I returned yesterday. The accompanying letter explained that she’d been sent a portrait draft — unprompted, she’d have me believe. The work of a painter named Lebasque in Orlais.” He gestured to her with the crust of stolen bread. “It featured the subject, yourself, seated on a throne in the nude. Drawn by someone who has clearly never laid eyes on you. For reasons I cannot fathom this man’s work is in high demand; apparently the gift carries some clout. She had asked for my opinion on it as an artist.”

It was hard to condemn a prank so well suited to ruffle his feathers. The image of him unwrapping a salacious canvas in the middle of the rotunda and then being honour-bound to study it was one she would have loved to witness herself.

Her grin only widened. “Well, don’t leave me in suspense — did you give it?”

And, oh, there it was: that flash of clever playfulness she loved in him. A rare twinkle to his eye and a little curl of one side of his mouth as he suppressed a smile. “I wrote that, among other liberties he’d taken, the flare of the hips was too wide and the breasts lacked weight.”

She laughed, and her delight was so infectious he could not help but join her.

Later, she would ask to see the scroll (he would not call it a ‘portrait’) — a request he refused on principle — and so decided to look for it herself. The ensuing search of his desk eventually led her to discover that he had several works of his own hidden away in a drawer. A locked drawer initially, but she had no reservations over picking it. Inside was a handful of rolled notes that appeared to be written in oddly fragmented, non-sensical, Elvish, and beneath those a small stack of drawing papers.

His projects were normally large and sprawling. Full of sharp angles and blocks of colour. This was the first time she’d seen such intimate pieces in his hand. Every one was of her.

Far less explicit, though somehow more revealing, longing was clear in every stroke.

In one, she sat on a rock by the riverside, bared feet dangling in the water. In another she took a battle-ready stance, her eyes hard and bow drawn. That one was bordered by two other busts depicting her nocking an arrow, then releasing it, creating a sequence of action. A third image simply showed her speaking with Cole by a fire — smiling warmly.

In all, the drawings numbered over a dozen. Each was dated in a bottom corner — some going back further than they’d been together. When flirtation was coy and new, and glances stolen. He’d clearly spent more time studying her than she knew.

Most were scenes of quiet contemplation, glimpsed without her knowledge, but one in particular made her stop and stare. It was a quick, messy, sketch of her standing in camp only half-dressed. The view was from behind, her arms raised to tie her hair, facing a rising sun. Though clearly drawn in a hurry, such care was paid to the lines of her neck and shoulders. The dip of her back, and the spray of freckles across her arms. Muscle and shade had been smudged in with a thumb, and the paper beneath thinned from repeated strokes, as if he’d carved her figure himself… traced the lines over and over until he had her every curve memorized.

No one had ever looked upon her with that kind of care. Suddenly she felt a bit guilty for snooping. She was tempted to take the drawing for herself, but instead put everything back the way she found it and re-locked the desk. Erasing all evidence of her trespass. She would leave him his devotions.

When next he came to her room to tend to the burns, hands stained from a day’s work, she thought upon the sketch as he skimmed them down her sides. Delicate prints of ink, like bruises, left upon
her healing skin for each affection spoken in the soft press of his fingers.

She wondered how often he’d run his fingers over the paper — yearning — before the first time he reached for her.

It took a week of twice daily sessions before her wounds were as healed as they would ever be. Only time would completely smooth the rippled scars across her forearms. Though they still stung when she stretched and trained the worst of their bite was relieved.

The buckle mark on her inner elbow never got much better.

She never informed her advisors what had caused it, either.

And it appeared neither did Bull or Cassandra.

She kept waiting for the inevitable conversation about spontaneous combustion to be sprung upon her, holding her breath around every corner for days, before it eventually became clear that they’d both chosen to leave that particular piece of information out of their reports. Why, she couldn’t know — she wasn’t about to ask them — but their omission granted her the time to think on how best to broach the topic. Discussing it was… complicated. Somehow even more than breaking the news of the pregnancy had been. And a little voice inside her was quick to remind that she’d gone months without telling them one secret and could just as easily ‘forget’ to tell them this one, too.

By Solas’ own admission it was just as likely the inclination would fade away once she gave birth. Which was… what? Four months away? Three and a half? Not far at all. Practically around the corner. So long as she learned to control any outbursts there was no reason to bring the issue forward. It would simply disappear on its own. Besides, there was nothing her advisors could or needed to ‘do’ about it so receiving the information would only cause needless alarm. The Commander himself had said she deserved to retain some privacy. There were no plans to set tables on fire or shatter guests in the great hall; if she was careful no one else had to know.

*The ever growing web of lies-by-omission might as well get another go-round.*

And this time Solas had nothing to say about her choice of omission, which was practically tacit agreement. She’d take it as agreement. The only time he spoke to the topic was to reiterate that the immediate goal was in teaching her enough basic proficiency to make it less likely she’d have another incident like the one in camp.

There wasn’t movement on that front until the healing sessions were completed and their evenings again free. Then, he revealed what had occupied so much of his attention since their return: a strategy on how best to ask Dorian for assistance.

The way he told it, approaching the man at all required more humility than he’d ever called upon in his life. Not to mention the work that went into a crafting the request with enough misdirection and half-truths that it would pique his interest but not invite deeper scrutiny. A careful balance was required. Fortunately, Solas knew his audience: Dorian was far too taken with the novelty of receiving a genuine compliment from him to ask too many questions.

It was also possible he believed Solas was exaggerating the claim of Ellana’s burgeoning magical talent, and viewed the request more as an opportunity to show off.

Still, withstanding the tide of mock-surprise and smug satisfaction that came of tasking him to do something he himself could not took considerable mettle.
Dorian was all flair and glamour when the two met in a secluded, snow-covered, grove outside of Skyhold. Poses and spins as he weighed each of the practice staves in turn; spares that Ellana had taken from the undercroft storage that wouldn’t be missed. All either too old, too damaged, or too weak to be of any real use on the battlefield and functionally no different from a blunted training sword. The lot was one of several requests he’d made upon learning he was to be tasked with her ‘tutoring’.

Another was regaining access to the wine cellar after Josephine locked him out.

She was still working on that one.

At first, the lesson was mostly comprised of his complaints about the location choice. And when she pushed him for more he doubled down on the griping.

“Have you noticed it’s freezing out here? I’ll be lucky if I still have all my toes at the end of the day.”

“You should have worn better shoes.”

“I no longer have any! You vomited all over my favourite pair!” He sniffed disapprovingly. “Never did get the stains out.”

Ellana gestured to one of the two staves leaning on the tree behind him. He’d gone through all three several times, twirling and testing their balance, but clearly favoured the one he currently held. “So start me with the fire rune. Surely you won’t be chilly if I manage to place a glyph beneath your feet.”

“I won’t be much of anything after a minute but I’ll appreciate the reprieve from the mountain air before I die.”

He gave the weapon another easy spin, then slammed the end deep into the snow. The impact sent a spray of flakes into the air, and a ripple of magic briefly held them there before they fell and settled once more upon the drifts at their feet.

He shook his head. “No, if there’s anything to this claim then fire is too tempestuous to start with. While easier to summon it’s also much harder to control, especially when you’re new to magic. This one—” He held up the staff he’d been using and tossed it to her. She caught it expertly in one hand. “—ice, is better. Ideally we’d go with something without a rune but apparently we’re fresh out of those.”

He took up a defensive stance, his own weapon ready, and nodded to her. “Now then, why don’t you try to show me something interesting before we succumb to hypothermia?”

The ribbing and grumbling continued most of the afternoon, interspersed with the occasional meandering story about his own childhood tutelage, youthful indiscretions, and the rare demonstration of actual magic. They traded more blows to pride than barriers. He didn’t let up until she’d managed to — rather unexpectedly — counter one of his spells by throwing a bolt of ice at his head.

Though the spell was small and weak, her aim was true: a lifetime spent finding her way around a bow had gifted her that. It only missed him by inches, and shattered into water on impact with the tree behind him. The resulting spray soaking both his clothes and face, giving him the appearance of a gawping fish as he stood, in stupefied silence, with his mouth hanging open.
When he finally found his words, “Sweet, merciful, Maker,” he breathed, “he wasn’t kidding — you really can do this!”

He took the task more seriously after that.

Complaints aside, he proved to be a much better teacher than Solas. By the end of the third day at work he’d managed to coax from her both another show of ice as well as the earliest beginnings of a protective barrier. Though the latter only appeared after he pummelled her with sparks for thirty continuous minutes.

Rather than bore her with lessons on magical theory she’d never use, Dorian preferred this ‘death by a thousand cuts’ approach to learning. Bombarding her with attacks she couldn’t defend against until she was goaded into a spontaneous magical response — then having her harness what followed. The end goal was to reduce the likelihood of unintentional spellcasting — “Sink or swim, my dear,” — and with her well of patience already spread so thin the method proved incredibly effective. Initially she’d had some reservations (chiefly, that it was really annoying) but even Solas would admit the idea had merit.

By a week into it she’d learned to successfully throw fire at a target rather than allowing it to burn in her hands. And, most importantly, she’d started to recognize the warning signs of welling mana in response to an emotional disturbance.

Mastering what to do with it once it began to bubble over she was still working on, but Dorian was eager to pay compliment to her progress. She might never be adept as a born mage but at least she posed less risk to the curtains now.

As a side benefit, the improved awareness of magical flow also led to greater control in wielding the Anchor. Typically it had periods of fits and starts not unlike muscle spasms. They were most common in the vicinity of a rift, but sometimes happened for no discernible reason at all. Either way: a painful symptom of the slow, inevitable, breakdown that Solas warned would befall her. Since she started spending her afternoons with Dorian she’d experienced less of them. When she mentioned it, he was unsurprised, reasoning that all magical command was linked — regardless of origin, element, or speciality. Learning to raise barriers and throw lightning would be just as beneficial as hours spent closing rifts. Practice was practice: the details didn’t matter.

He never did ask for a proper explanation of how magic had managed to manifest so late in life.

As was typical, she didn’t offer one either.

The Anchor was uncharted territory, and in lieu of proper study it was easy to put any suspicions to bed with a hand-wave of, ‘weird Anchor stuff’. Deceiving him was a necessary evil; unavoidable unless she had the mind to tell him everything. Pulling one loose thread would unravel the whole mess — Fade to Fen’Harel — everything was connected.

She hoped one day she could say it all.

Far in the future, maybe… when the state of the world did not feel so uncertain, and the breakneck pace of their lives slowed down.

If she was still alive. If they all were.

Until then, truth was strictly rationed; meted out in small doses only to those who absolutely required it. For the rest: a careful balancing act of story and song.

Fortunately, that burden was about to get one lie lighter.
On the day the fateful meeting was to take place Josephine was kind enough to clear almost every engagement from her schedule — freeing up the hours for Ellana to prepare however best she could. The intent was to grant her time to relax and think carefully upon her words but she was far too restless to sit around. Instead, she spent the morning hand-delivering messages to her friends telling them when and where to congregate that evening, then running away before they could ask her any follow-up questions.

The timing was Leliana’s idea: it would happen just before dinner was served, when the great hall was emptied out. Soldiers and guards were changing shifts and visitors were on their way to the Herald’s Rest or the guest quarters. Most of the castle’s staff would be assisting in the kitchens. There would be few — if any — left to witness the strange, secret, gathering of the Inquisition’s most important members.

The only obligation that couldn’t be moved to a later date was the healer’s visit, which she was told had been set months in advance, and so resisted any attempts to postpone it. Looking back later, this seemed less a problem of schedule conflicts and more about obstinance. The healer visited on her schedule, solely and exclusively, no matter where she travelled. All patients were equally inconvenient.

The old woman — Helena, she recalled — came even better prepared this time than the last. Her ratty physician’s bag packed to the brim with vials, reagents, and tools. Deep reds and polished silver haphazardly slipped into pockets already stuffed full with folded parchment. There was far more than what one might assume was needed for a single afternoon. She’d packed for all possible outcomes, having left Ellana with several to choose from when last they spoke.

She let herself into the tower, much as she had the first time; just walked up the stairs upon finding the door unbolted. Waiting for neither invitation nor greeting.

No time for decorum. No care for etiquette.

Her audacity came as both a comfort and a phenomenal test of patience.

Ellana had spent the last several hours bent over her cursive practice, enjoying the quiet, and so hardly noticed the courtesy knock before the squeal of unoiled hinges alerted her to a guest. She scrambled for the wrap slung over the back of her chair to cover herself. Barely managing a strained, “Who’s—?” before a familiar head of wiry grey hair cleared the landing and she could pull her heart from her throat.

Helena was, predictably, unmoved by the poor welcome. “You’re coming along nicely,” she commented as she crossed the room, offering only a cursory glance. “Even got a few curves on you now. Bones like a bird last I saw you. Was it the tonics that did the trick? Any one better than the others?” She did not stop talking long enough to allow an answer. Instead ordering, “Over here, get up, let me look at you,” somewhere in Ellana’s general direction. Then she heaved her bag onto the bed and fumbled with the latch.

Full to bursting, it breathed forth a gout of paper once opened. Dozens of little scraps caught the drafts and scattered. Like caged birds set free, notes and secrets flew into corners and toward open windows. Leaving the scent of earth and dried lavender behind them.

Helena cursed them for escaping. Feebly snatching at the air — “Blast it all!” — but scolded Ellana for her attempt to help. Shook a gnarled finger. “You lay down and take your bindings off! Mind I don’t chase you out from behind the curtains, too. Your type always got a dozen things to do and no time to do them. If I let you start we’ll never get done.”
She did as she was bid. Sat on the edge of her bed and unlaced her corset, but assured, “I have the afternoon clear. I’m in no rush.”

Helena snorted. “I am.”

Perhaps the bursting bag wasn’t just a matter of over-preparedness after all.

“Do you have other patients here?”

The question was answered with another posed. “Did you think I came all this way just for you?”

Ellana blinked. “Well… yes, actually.”

In a surprising show of agility for a woman her age, the healer dropped to hands and knees to sweep the notes out from beneath a table. Instructions, ingredients, doses; all writ in her coded shorthand not even the most learned scholar could hope to decipher. She shoved them, clumsily and crumpled, into her pockets. “Got others to see after you and at least one more in your condition. Busy day. Here for two then gone again.”

There was a beat of silence while she absorbed that.

“There are other pregnant women? In Skyhold?”

The populace was mostly soldiers and servants of the Chantry, neither of which seemed likely candidates. Beyond that were the few dozen staff; merchants, handmaids, cooks and tradesmen, and the odd traveller overstaying their welcome. There were only a handful of civilians. Those who’d come from afar to support a loved one in service to the cause. She’d seen no children; none who were permanent residents, anyway. A fortress in the middle of the Frostbacks seemed a poor place to try and raise a family.

*Suppose I’ll know soon enough myself.*

Helena pulled herself back up with a mighty heave and a groan to match. Old bones clicking as she went. She gave Ellana a knowing look — then a shove as she approached the bedside — encouraging her to lay back. “It’s a mite drafty here, my dear,” she said. “You aren’t the only one who thought to bring someone to your bed to keep it warm. Tents are cold, and war makes for lonely hearts. Ripe spring this year.” Then she added, “Won’t be telling you who though, ‘fore you ask.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Ellana lied. She was dreadfully curious.

“Of course not,” Helena replied, and the curl of a thin lip betrayed the deadpan delivery. She lifted Ellana’s shirt and laid frighteningly cold hands upon her middle. More roughly than she’d like — she remembered this from last time, too — digging into her hips and under her ribs. Once she found what she was looking for she walked two fingers up the darkened line drawn down the centre of her stomach, following the curve of her womb. Counting each step as she went. “Your time will come before theirs, though. You’re about seven months now.”

“Six,” Ellana corrected.

“*Seven.*” She did this the first time, too. “If he’s human — six and a half.”

“I don’t believe I told you either way.”

Belatedly, it occurred to her she probably should. It might be relevant to care.
But, “I don’t believe I needed your answer,” Helena quipped in return. “Doesn’t change much if you’re unsure or keen to him to yourself. Fighters have too much muscle on you to properly feel anyway. I’ll know for sure once they arrive if they was early or late. But any healer worth their salt can offer a fair prediction. Been doing this a long time Herald, and when your pains come with the first thaw you’ll owe me a sovereign extra for your cheek.”

It was almost charming. Ellana smirked. “What will you owe me when it comes the month after?”

“The reputation I staked on it. A hundred came before you and a hundred will come after; I’ve yet to be so far off. Mark my words, you won’t make it to the end of Cloudreach. Not when you’re this high in Winternacht.”

The depths of her confidence was inspiring.

“Though you are a little thing. Even for an elf.” She held up her hands, hip-width apart. Squinted and said, “You Dalish folk are a mite leaner than your cousins in the city. No tattoos, but I can see it by your bones you were raised wild. Already too full for a good meal. Can’t be comfortable with those bindings on day in, day out. It’s a wonder you can still breathe!” Deep-set eyes flicked to the corset that lay next to her on the bed. Metal grommets strained by the tight-lacing, quite literally tearing at the seams. “Won’t be much longer ’til it does you no good at all.”

“Comfort isn’t exactly the goal,” Ellana answered between a grunt and wince. Helena drove in a finger and thumb particularly deep. Wiggling them back and forth, searching, like she was trying to find a way inside from the outside. Ellana could only withstand it for so long. More pressing than the discomfort was the novel and alarming threat of wetting herself. “That’s really quite uncomfortable — is it entirely necessary?”

Helena did not let up. “For mapping, aye. Could come in from the bottom if you’d prefer it.”

“Carry on.”

It only took a moment longer to find what she’d been searching for.

“Found a back—” she said and slid a hand up and down, just left of the middle, tracing the shape within. “—was looking for the head too; think I’ve got it here. Good and nestled in. If it stays this way through the end your birth will be a quick one. Must be feeling plenty of elbows — you don’t offer much room to stretch. You get much turning?”

She had no idea how to even begin to answer that question.

Fortunately Helena moved on to a more pertinent one before she was expected to. “Never did answer me about the tonics.”

True honesty would require telling a story she was quite sure the healer had never heard before, in spite of her years at the trade. All the experience in the world couldn’t prepare her for delivering the bastard child of an ancient Elven demigod.

Careful omission would do fine. So, “No, it wasn’t them,” she answered. “It’s just gotten easier over time. It’s fading as I go; I keep down most of my meals now.”

Helena nodded approvingly and — finally — stopped her prodding. She pulled a hand-bound book from one of her pockets (losing some more scraps of paper in the process), and took a few notes against the beside table. If she strained, Ellana could only just make out the beginnings of a word or two on the top of the page before it was stowed again. Denying her the opportunity to satisfy her own curiosity.
If the healer noticed her prying she said nothing to it. “Just a few more things and then you can go back to your paperwork, Herald. First: I’d recommend you be moved to your birth house no later than mid-Drakonis.”

A month earlier she’d have thought to leave. “So soon?”

The wrinkles around Helena’s eyes deepened with a smile, but the flash of yellowed teeth did not convey kindness as much as incredulity. “You travelled much in this state?”

“Not much,” she replied honestly. “It’s getting more difficult.”

“Aye, and it’ll only get worse the further in you get. Days on horseback, even in carriage, is not something you’ll want to volunteer for at the end — it’s a sorry state to find yourself full to the brim and your arse too sore to even stretch your legs.

“More importantly, you won’t make it to Bloomingtide, as I said, so don’t plan on leaving when you’ve got no days left to spare or you’ll sorely regret it. I’ve delivered on kitchen floors and in garden beds but I prefer not to strain my back crawling into whatever watery ditch you end up in if you leave too late. Besides—” her gaze slid to the corset and back. “—this seems a secret you’re meaning to keep, so it’ll serve you better to sneak away from prying eyes before you drop.”

It was a fair point.

She didn’t care for it, but it was fair.

The timetable of tasks to be done and plans to be put into motion would need to be moved up, which was inconvenient, but for that she had no one to blame but herself.

She didn’t like that much, either. So she chose to simply nod her agreement.

It had almost been a normal conversation with the woman. Until she said something bewildering again. “In the time you’ve got left you should be bringing down the collar of your shirts, too.”

Try as she might, Ellana could not connect the thread of conversation between those two points. She made a guess: “For feeding?”

There was a bark of laughter. “If you like! But it’s mostly for the look-sees. The polite will look away but the curious will have something else to ponder, and when they think back on you they’ll remember the shape of your décolletage and not your middle. Hide in plain sight, I say. Your suitor still come by?”

There’d been barely enough time to register the suggestion of weaponizing her cleavage and so she did not immediately answer the question.

No matter, as Helena took her stunned silence for confirmation anyway.

“Then he gets an extra treat, too. Everybody’s happy.”

“And this works?” She was only half-convinced.

“Every time,” Helena affirmed. She began rummaging through her bag, holding up a series of colourful vials to the light streaming in through the balcony, humming thoughtfully, then tossing them aside. Half the bag was spilled upon the duvet before she found what she was looking for. “A-ha!”
She produced a round, dark green, bottle with a faded label and passed it over. “Carry this once you travel to the birth house. Shepherd’s purse and amrita vein: smells bad, tastes worse. Drink the whole thing and chase it with as much water as you can stomach. Good for helping you not bleed to death if I’m late to tend you or your cunny’s cleaved in twain.”

She held up another that looked like a draught of watery grass. “This one’s comfrey and roots; comes after. Don’t drink it, though. Good as a poultice for anywhere that’s sore.” That one was tucked into Ellana’s elbow.

A third — “Angelica, in case the afterbirth is shy,” — was balanced on top of the previous two. “Now I’ll be coming to join you in the end, though I don’t know where they’ll keep you yet so mind you have these close for me. I like to travel light. And if the babe is too eager to wait ’til the end make sure to send a raven when it looks like you’ve sneezed your breeches.”

Mystified, “When I’ve—” she began.

“Sneezed, that’s right. You’ll know it when you see it. Ain’t much else you can confuse it for.”

After a pause, “Right,” Ellana said flatly.

“Right,” echoed Helena, and she scooped the discarded vials back into her overstuffed bag and closed it with a snap. A few potions lighter, yet somehow no less full. “If you’ve got no more for me I’ll be leaving to get to my next.” She bowed her head; an attempt at deference that utterly failed to look even close to genuine, and, “Herald,” she bid.

As before, she did not wait for polite convention like being shown the door or properly dismissed. Instead, after a cursory scan of the room confirmed she’d not left anything behind, she descended the stairs to let herself out. Leaving Ellana with the armful of unlabelled bottles and a number of questions she hadn’t quite managed to ask.

With her eyes cast down at the papers she was still tucking into her bag, Helena did not see the person waiting just outside the door when she opened it. Standing, poised, with fist raised ready to knock. She ran into them — stumbling backward from the impact. Almost falling, saved only by their quick reflexes.

“My apologies,” Solas said, and steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. Once she’d recovered from the shock he bent to retrieve her dropped bag. “I did not see you — are you alright?”

Helena accepted the bag, but paused with her fingers on the handle, using the opportunity to give him a long look up and down. Her gaze shamelessly lingering on the points of his ears. “You are a tall one,” she said, instead of thanks.

Though he prompted her, “I’m sorry?” she did not repeat it. Nor offered him any additional insight. Only stepped around him and then made her way toward the great hall. Leaving him standing before the door left ajar so he might invite himself in just as she had done. Propriety was not a standard he was keen to disregard, though: only once the woman had disappeared from the connecting hall did Solas give the door a quiet knock. Then, upon hearing Ellana’s acknowledgment, he stepped inside. Assuring it would close behind him.
When he reached the top of the stairs, “Was that the healer?” he asked. She’d mentioned the old woman in passing.

Ellana removed the key from the lock on the long desk drawer and stowed it in another. The vials within were beginning to pile up: she’d used little of them. “Yes, the midwife. She’s a bit odd.”

“I noticed.”

Solas joined her at the desk, and once close enough for the opportunity, ran his hands along her arms and gently lay a kiss upon her shoulder. Smiling, when she hummed contentedly. But the moment was short-lived. “What did she say?”

Ellana sighed. “That I’m to move to a birth house by mid-Drakonis. I’d be staying there until several weeks later, I assume. I hope not months. Or, maybe that’s appropriate. To be honest I’ve no idea how the ‘after’ part works.”

“While I’m no expert,” he cautioned, “I imagine it is better to err on the side of too much time than too little. Though it does seem early. Did you not say it was closer to the end of spring?”

“She disagrees,” she replied, and rolled her eyes. “I think it’s a matter of professional pride. I’m fairly certain I know when this happened, in spite of her estimate, and it would put me somewhere near mid-Bloomingtide. If she’s right the timing would be ideal, but if I’m right I’ll be bored to tears for weeks. Just sitting around… waiting.” She threw up her hands, turning within the brace of his arms so she could face him.

Solas’ gaze drifted as he considered. “I will need to bring more materials than I’d originally planned on. I’d only anticipated being away a short time. The added weight may require an additional mount or pack horse for the bags, which limits us to the road.”

She blinked. “You plan to go with me?”

His eyes snapped back to hers. Brow lowered — he almost looked offended. “Why would I remain at Skyhold?”

He did have her there; she hadn’t really thought about it. “I… suppose I just assumed. It’s what is typically done.”

Softer, “Being the status quo does not make it the better option. Barring any personal objections you might have, I would stay with you for as long as possible,” he said. “Even beyond being your lover, I would prefer you not be without a mage capable of administering healing spells. Childbirth is a difficult ordeal and—” He paused to take note of the odd, amused, expression she was suddenly wearing. “What is it?”

“‘Your lover?’” she repeated.

A brow raised. “Is that not accurate?”

“No, it is. I just don’t think I’ve ever heard you refer to yourself that way before.”

A small smile followed. “Would you prefer something different?”

“It’s not a matter of preference,” she corrected, so he would not mistake the query for disapproval. “Though I am curious what you would call this — me — in your time.”

Before answering he took hold of one of her hands. Laced their fingers together so he could lift it to
his lips and kiss it softly. “*Ma vhenan. Ma shiral.*”

She gave him a wry smile. “That’s much more romantic than ‘person I’m having sex with’.”

“I have always considered ‘lover’ to mean, ‘person I am in love with’ but I suppose either definition works in this case. On that note, I’m curious about something you said: that you ‘know when this happened’ — you were referring to conception? Is that possible?”

He was never so full of eager curiosity as he was when asking questions about her experience. There were so few things he’d not lived himself — it was always a joy to offer him something new. For this he had no history to draw upon.

“I can’t know for certain, of course, but call it an educated guess. The timing lines up, anyway…” There was a bashful pause. She rubbed at the back of her neck, suddenly feeling rather awkward. Began, “It’s funny, because you’ve always said it was such a foolish thing to do—” but never finished.

The door to the tower swung open with a whine and a familiar voice called out, “*Are you decent?*”

Sera waited at the bottom for exactly two seconds before stepping in and climbing the stairs.

“Doesn’t matter — coming in anyway.”

Her footfalls were heavy and slow on the stone tiles, so by the time she reached the top Ellana had re-wrapped her belt and Solas had enough time to retreat to a respectful distance. Standing near the bed with his hands clasped behind his back. Sera gave him a brief nod to acknowledge his attendance, but no other greeting.

“Why are we all meeting in here and not the war room anyway? Don’t think we’ve ever done it before. Is this some sort of a surprise party? Someone’s birthday?”

“That’s a complicated question: I don’t technically have one.”

“*Whose birthday? Is that why we’re here?*” Varric was next inside, right on Sera’s heels. The door hadn’t even had a chance to close yet. His climb was a little less graceful — he was neither as elegant nor as appreciative of the deep-set stairs in the tower — and once at the top he leaned heavily on the banister. He gestured to Ellana with a thumb. “Your birthday?”

“It’s not my birthday.”

Sera walked over to the ornate chaise lounge set against the balcony rail and dropped herself upon the cushions. The impact skid the wooden legs over a bump in the floor. She stretched out, crossing her ankles over the opposite arm and folding her hands behind her head. “You haven’t had one in a while, though — not since we baked that cake.”

“That wasn’t for my birthday,” Ellana informed, “That was just a cake.”

“Oh.” Sera frowned. “Is it coming up, then? Must be. Did we do something for it last year?”

“Not that I remember,” Varric answered for her. “When is it?”

“That’s a complicated question: I don’t technically have one.”

Sera wrinkled her nose. “How d’ya not have a birthday?”
Varric looked just as interested in this answer too. Ellana sighed. “Because I was adopted into clan Lavellan after my parents were killed. I don’t remember anything from before. The only ‘day’ I know is the one on which they found me.” She shrugged. “It was more celebrated as a nameday than a birthday, though.”

Downstairs, the door clicked softly as it came to rest in its frame, and then immediately opened again.

Sera sat up a little straighter. “Wait, does that mean you don’t know how old you are either?”

“No, I know,” she answered. Then, on second thought, “Well, within a few years. I was three or four, and I spent almost thirty-one summers with the clan before the Conclave and two here since, so—”

“But you’ve said before you were starving, right?” A shared history of food scarcity was something they’d discussed before. “What if you were just really scrawny for a ten year old?”

There was a pause. “I feel like I would know if I’d been ten.”

Dorian had arrived now, half-way into the conversation but perfectly comfortable to drop himself into it regardless. As he swept across the room he added, “Well, I’ve always thought you looked lovely. And for forty? Elves age so gracefully — can’t say you look a day over thirty!” He found a spot by the hearth and held out his hands to soak up the heat, frowned, then surreptitiously flicked a wrist to stoke the fire brighter.

“Better than dwarves,” Varric snorted. “We look forty by age 12.” He scratched his chin. “It’s the beards.”

“I’m not forty!”

Sera narrowed her eyes. “How do you know, though? I mean really?”

Next on the landing was Blackwall, along with The Iron Bull who followed him in a moment after. Taking the steps two at a time so he’d nearly overtaken the warden once they’d made it up. Blackwall joined Sera on the chaise; asking for a shared seat by way of shoving her legs off the cushions to make room. She made a face, but offered no protest.

He adjusted his armour so it wouldn’t catch on the delicate fabrics. “Know what?”

The door opened and shut again.

“Her birthday.” Sera called the answer over one shoulder so whoever else just came in would hear it too. Then, quieter, she mumbled, “Or ‘nameday’ — whatever.”

Blackwall perked up. “Oh, is it your birthday? Is that what’s happening?”

“No, she doesn’t know it,” corrected Sera.

He balked. “How do you not know your own birthday?”

Bull opted to stay on one of the topmost stairs so he could lean his folded arms upon the stone rail rather than try to find out which of the fancy chairs could take his weight. “It’s not that uncommon. Under the Qun we don’t get that kind of information, either.”

“No presents then?” Sera’s face was a tapestry of emotion. Caught somewhere between sad,
confused, and light betrayal. As though this revelation had paid her personal insult. “Getting a present is part of being a kid!”

But he was unbothered, and shrugged dismissively. “We don’t celebrate birthdays; just count the years. If you don’t know any different you don’t miss it.”

“We should fix that,” Varric chimed in. “Have a party for everyone who hasn’t had a chance to celebrate. Goodies, cake, drink, music… could be fun! Anyone else here not know theirs?” He nodded at Solas, now leaning against a bedpost. “I don’t think I’ve gotten yours yet, Chuckles.”

Dorian sniffed. “Mine just passed but I’ll gladly take another if it means we can get out the good wine.”

“Oh is it your birthday, darling?” Vivienne arrived and slid in past Bull. Taking a position near the back of the room. As always, immaculately dressed in a long, silver, gown and unbothered by the unusual location of the meeting. “You should have said. If I’d known I would have had something brought in from Val Royeaux. I could have my tailor make you a lovely set of blouses, the drape of the ones you’ve worn lately are atrocious — you must allow me to have it corrected.”

“No, that’s—” Ellana was almost irritated now, yet couldn’t stop herself from laughing. Worse, every time someone else cut her off Solas flicked his eyes toward her, a smile barely hid in the press of his lips. Quietly amused and completely unwilling to offer any help in wresting control of the conversation. “That’s not why—”

“She does a nameday,” Sera corrected meaningfully — seemingly unaware she’d interrupted again. Then, to Ellana, “Is that much different?”

“We have them in Nevarra,” provided Cassandra from the stair. She was the last in, and this time the door managed to stay shut behind her. Only one person left and he did not make much habit of using them. “Not everyone celebrates, however. If you come from a prominent family your nameday is usually associated with a great deed or an event credited to one of your ancestors.”

Blackwall made a thoughtful noise, waiting until the Seeker made it to the top to ask, “Is there a Pentaghast name day?”

“There are several.”

“Great!” exclaimed Varric. He made a grand, sweeping, motion with a hand. “We can roll it in with the rest!”

Bull turned back to Ellana. “You guys don’t have family names though, right? Just the clan? It’s similar in the Qun. Is there a Lavellan nameday?”

This was almost on-topic.

“No, we do it for your proper name. It’s an old tradition — a little superstitious. Not everyone observes it. Sometimes babies will go several weeks, or longer, before their name is spoken. To keep them hidden from—”

Well.

“—I-it’s just considered bad luck. Once it’s time there’ll be a gathering to confirm it. My name was given to me when I was brought into the clan — so that was what my years were counted by.”

Several heads turned toward her. Several breaths sucked in to ask the obvious question.
Blackwall got there first. “You were given your name by the clan? Not your parents?”

Now that she’d started down this line of questioning she was doomed to finish it. But, truth be told, it was likely to be less unpleasant than trying to force the conversation back on track.

“I don’t recall what my parents named me, only that they called me ‘da’vhenan’. I didn’t talk much when I first arrived and the others had to call me something. Keeper chose ‘Ellana’.”

“Why not just call you Da’vhenan?” asked Sera.

Predictably, Solas did not deign to join the conversation until he could speak to Elvish tradition. “Because it is an endearment, not a name.”

Cassandra tilted her chin curiously. “Were you named for someone?”

“No.” It was a generous notion — as if a ward would deserve such an honour. “I wasn’t: it’s a very common name. There’s at least one in every clan. The Arlathvhens — gatherings of many clans — were always confusing. Someone would call out for one of us and a dozen would run over.”

Sera nodded. “Cities, too. I knew, like, three Ellanas in Denerim.”

There was a scatter of thoughtful nods and raised brows.

Then Dorian clapped his hands, delighted. “Well, this has been the most productive meeting we’ve had in a while!” he exclaimed. “I’ve already learned more about you here than I have in the last two years combined — and it’s only been five minutes! We should really do this more often.”

Varric laughed. “Maybe we should add ’Twenty Questions’ to the list of things to do at the birthday party.”

Cassandra frowned. Having arrived last she missed this part of the conversation. “We’re having a birthday party?”

“**Mythal enaste ma halani, it is not my birthday!**”

Gently, to smooth her fraying nerves, Vivienne interjected, “Even without the occasion I should get you something. I cannot let you continue to be seen in such drab fashion.” She gestured to the thick sash tied around her waist. Chosen only to add another layer to a disguise worn painfully thin. “If you’re fond of the belt we can work with it, but let’s at least start with another colour. Gold is a far better match for your complexion.”

“She does have a point,” added Dorian, with meaning. “It’s not your best look.”

Sera snickered. “Yeah — plus, it makes you look pregnant!”

She was determined for this not to be as drawn out and awkward as telling her advisors had been — there would be no dancing around the point this time. She’d not watch them argue amongst each other. And after the derailments this conversation had already suffered, Sera had given her as good an opportunity as she was going to get to bring it back around.

A deep breath in and…

“That’s probably because I am,” she said.

For the first few seconds nothing happened.
Then — slowly, and one by one — the statement registered on each face in the room with a look of shock, surprise; and in at least one case, joy.

*When did Cole get here?*

“Oh,” said Vivienne, quietly.

The stunned silences she was prepared for — she’d seen that before. And really, it was the most logical response. This could take a few minutes to sink in. The room might have become oppressively large for it, but she would not begrudge them that.

The colourful range of expressions that followed she’d anticipated, too. From the shifting, uneven, mix of bewilderment and growing alarm in the downturn of Sera’s mouth, to the delighted surprise in Varric’s climbing brows. Even Bull’s subtle, knowing, gaze had made an appearance in at least one or two of her imaginary practice speeches.

Then, abruptly, Sera sat up. Kicking Blackwall in the shin as she swung her legs out — though it did not appear to make much of an impression on him. “What, really?”

“Really,” Ellana affirmed. *Might as well go all in.* “Here—”

Carefully, and with only a moment’s pause to calm the trembling of her fingers, she untied the sash around her waist. Then straightened her posture — chin high, shoulders back — and let it drop to the floor. A few eyes followed it down to where it gathered in a pool at her feet, but most were focused slightly higher.

It was, perhaps, the biggest challenge thus far to restrain herself from glancing at Solas then. See if he had crafted an air of thoughtful nonchalance or retreated into the familiar, stoic, façade that was so comfortable to him. He’d barely spoken since everyone arrived and if she didn’t know him better she’d say it was his way of moping for having been forced to attend.

Even if that were true it would not have been terribly surprising, either.

Unexpectedly, it was Cassandra that threw her.

As soon as the words left her lips the Seeker’s eyes went wide with shock, but it was not until she revealed her silhouette was she called to act upon it. The instant the sash hit the floor Cassandra turned, incensed, toward Solas and, “*How could you let this happen?!*” she accused.

And just like that the announcement was no longer the focus of the conversation.

There was no hope of rebuking her fury with only the blatant double-take Solas offered in response. Blinking, lips parted around a breath he hadn’t quite managed to take, and startled into silence by the sheer gall. She’d managed the pull the rug out from under him so spectacularly that he was left at a total loss. Managing only to stammer a quiet, “I…” before she cut him off and launched into a proper tirade.

“She is the Herald of Andraste! Not only a leader of the Inquisition but a figure of great importance — an inspiration to countless people!” She stuttered and stammered. “Your… this … puts her at risk!”

With a thin, nervous, laugh, “Seeker…” Varric began, and made to take a step toward her.

Bull leaned to one side. Stopped him with a hand laid gently on his shoulder. “Give her a minute, she’ll spin out.”
“What would it cost us if she was forced to step down for your whim?” Cassandra took a step closer to Solas — and he very nearly took a step back — she gestured wildly, though her focus never wavered. “No one else can wield the Anchor and no one has galvanized the forces of the Inquisition better than she has! The fight against Corypheus, the Avaris contacts, the opening of trade roads, Orleas’ civil war… She is crucial to all these successes! Her legacy may be young, but it is powerful — blessed by the Maker! That already makes her a target of opposing powers. Any child she bears will inherit the same burden, yet there is no consequence to you at all!

“And what would become of them should something befall you both? Who would take them in? What family do you have who would step forward? They could spend their entire lives at risk of reprisal from opponents and radicals if their origins were known! Do you know what that is like for—?”

Then, suddenly, she stopped.

Her expression fell slack; arms slowly sinking against her sides. Better judgement only just then catching up to the wave of righteous indignation that drove her forward and sent her heart careening into her throat.

With the fog lifted it became belatedly — painfully — apparent that she’d delivered the sermon to a much larger audience than she’d ever meant to.

No one was looking at the Inquisitor anymore.

Colour bloomed upon her cheeks. Eyes cut guiltily between Ellana and Solas. Rather than chagrin they wore a matching expression of surprise, staring back baffled and wide-eyed. Somehow, in spite of the nature of the revelation, no one had been more exposed than she.

There was a chair behind her, by the desk.

She turned around and sat upon it — fingers curled to a white-knuckle grip upon the underside of the seat. Shamed by the outburst, she said nothing more.

The tension went unbroken for several long, painful, seconds while the other attendants struggled to process all that just happened.

Then, abruptly, Blackwall shot forward like a man struck. Pointed an accusing finger at Solas and exclaimed, “Wait… you?”.

Though Solas offered him no confirmation, the warden took his dumbstruck silence as one anyway.

And then he started laughing.

At first just a hoarse, quiet, giggle he could almost contain that quickly spiralled out of control into a deep, booming, roar. A contagious fit of laughter that spread one by one through the room, starting with snickers and smiles, until everyone had been swept up in the mirth. Some unabashedly, others demurely pressing fingers to their lips to try and cover it.

Only Cole, still unnoticed in his seat cross-legged upon the banister, did not share in the merriment. His eyes darted from face to face, struggling to follow all the tangled threads that spanned the room.

Blackwall scrubbed a hand over his eyes. Managed to fumble out an apology between fits. “I’m sorry— it’s just—” He cleared his throat. Tried, and failed, to suppress a smile. “—a lot of things
just started making sense.”

Before he had a chance to clarify, “Oh, what!” Sera yelled. She threw her arms up. “You didn’t know?! Fucking hells, I could have kept that money!” She gave him a shove, but far from shamed, he only fell against the arm of the lounge and started laughing again.

Ellana tried not to betray how hard it was not to join him. “You made a bet?”

“Not about you — it was more about him.” Sera nodded at Solas. “You just happened to also be involved in the terms that settled it.”

Dorian gestured to her, brows raised. “You knew?”

“Well, not this part!” Sera protested, and folded her arms. Clicked her tongue — a little disapprovingly. “Just that…” She gave each of the accused a meaningful look. “You know. At least once.”

Bull coughed loudly.

Not one to waste an opportunity, Varric moved on Cassandra — who had yet to recover from her own indignity. A pink flush still high on her cheeks. “And you? I’m very interested to hear how you know!”

“I…”

The colour darkened to a much deeper shade of red. It didn’t lend much credence to the answer she gave.

“…guessed.”

Grinning, Varric gestured between them. “Oh, we are having a conversation later, you and I.”

“Perhaps if we ever finish this one,” muttered Solas darkly.

Now he was moping.

“As entertaining as this has been—” came a voice, and all at once all the side conversation stopped to hear it.

Leliana, along with another figure, had managed to enter the room while the chaos unfolded and make it half way up the stairs without anyone noticing. The Spymaster was leaning against the outer wall, arms crossed, wearing a smile and — more rarely — her hood down around her shoulders. The figure next to her was unfamiliar; their face obscured by a heavy cloak. Only lips and a pointed chin visible beneath, framed by loose waves of deep brown hair. Not unlike Ellana’s.

“—there are a few points we need to go over, now that everyone is up to speed.”

“Thank the gods,” Ellana said under her breath. Without outside help she’d have never reined this in. Having everyone gather together for this seemed like a grand idea at the time but in practice was more like trying to herd a pack of wild boars into a pen.

Children. All of them.

They were all snapped to attention now though, and so, “As you can imagine, this changes how things will go from here forward,” she said to the room. Then walked to the middle, turning in a slow circle, so she might once more focus the group. She felt oddly vulnerable beneath their gaze
with her sash left behind on the floor. It was the first time she’d appeared before them without it. “In particular, the next few months. Firstly, it is imperative this information not make it beyond Skyhold’s walls if we can manage it. Thus far we’ve been able to keep it under wraps—”

“Literally!” Sera flashed a cheeky smile. And a few others followed her example.

Ellana did too. She’d grant them a few jokes at her expense; it would do well to ease the remaining tension. Cassandra still had yet to lift her eyes from the floor. “Some of the time, yes,” she replied. “But mostly by cutting back the duties I’m expected to perform face-to-face. Most of the work I’ve done in the last month or so has been on paper, or communicated by others. Josephine handles a great deal more than she used to — I’m sure some of you have noticed.

“Second, once we reach spring and I’m near the end I’ll be moved to a safe house. I’ll be there as little as a few weeks, or as much as several months, depending on how things unfold. I won’t be alone, of course — I’ll have an escort, guard, and healer, perhaps others—” The last point was punctuated by a meaningful look in Solas’ direction. His lips twitched but fell just short of a proper smile. “—But outside of that, the less traffic we create between there and here, the better. Otherwise we risk not only my safety, but that of anyone else who might require use of the location later. We only have so many dedicated to this purpose.

“Being away for that long — as well as being seen less around the grounds leading up to that date — has the potential to cause problems. Start rumours we’d rather not empower. Fortunately, Leliana has prepared an elegant solution…” Ellana lifted a hand toward her, granting an opportunity for her to take the reins.

She was quick to grasp it. “Thank you, Inquisitor,” she said. Then climbed, smooth and silent, up the remaining steps. Carving a path through Vivenne, Varric and Bull — gathered around the landing — who parted to make room for her and the curious guest.

Once the pair reached the centre of the room, and Ellana had stepped back, the stranger took hold of her hood with both hands and pushed it back upon her shoulders. Revealing a face so similar to the Herald’s they could be taken as twins.

Others had the same thought, it seemed, for Cole gave it voice in Leliana’s lightly accented cadence: “Not twins — but perhaps sisters.”

Leliana smiled. “This is Mirnan, she will act as the Inquisitor’s double.”

“Mira,” the elf corrected.

“An interesting name,” Solas commented mildly. “For whom were you intended to serve as vengeance, I wonder?” The question could pass as simple curiosity, but an attentive ear would hear the weight he lent it. Not only to assess whether her bare face was evidence of deeper ignorance of Elvish culture — there was a wealth of knowledge required to fulfill the role of a Dalish Inquisitor — but also to test her mettle. Chances were high she would be subject to far deeper scrutiny than this, either as herself or in the guise of the Herald.

But her answer was quick, practiced; and she gave it readily. “For my mother, messere. My father was neither good nor kind, and she believed I was the one good thing he was capable of producing. She hoped one day I would be able to bring him ruin for his misdeeds.”

He raised a brow; consideration in the tilt of his chin. “And did you?”

She smiled, and the expression was deeply at odds with the sorrowful tone she took. Posturing to
sell her talent to perform. “A terrible fall. They say it was the drink that did it.” She granted a moment for the others to react — exchange looks of admiration or disbelief — then she folded one arm against her chest and gave them all a bow, glancing at each in turn. “Pleased to meet you all.”

The resemblance was uncanny; near enough that she would pass easily at a glance. To someone who did not know the Inquisitor intimately there would be no discerning them. Only up close, under a much more careful eye, was it possible to see all the little differences in make and manner that created the hoax.

Her accent was not quite Dalish, not quite Ferelden — but a curious mix of the two. The work of the latter trying on the former, but not quite practiced enough for it to flow smoothly. While it struck an odd chord in Ellana’s ears it was not likely to be noticed by anyone outside the clans.

Her hair was looser, but that was easily fixed.

Her skin a shade lighter, which was less easy.

The bridge of her nose was too thin and there were not enough freckles upon it. There was a small gap between her front teeth that, while charming, stood out when she smiled. And she lacked Ellana’s distinctive, lop-sided, smirk. But that too could be remedied with a mirror and some practice.

If there was a difference in height or weight it was negligible. In body type they were near identical… other than the bump, of course. Something Mira had clearly been briefed on as she did not seem at all surprised by the image of a pregnant Herald.

Dorian was first to offer comment. “She’s—” then, “Mira—” he corrected, gesturing to her, “a fair deception. I don’t know that she’ll fool any of us, but I imagine most of the populace here will be easily duped. To say nothing for visitors who’ve had little to no personal interaction with the Inquisitor.”

“Begging your pardon,” Mira cut in, “but I’ve already fooled you.” And — ah — perhaps she had practiced the smirk. She flashed him a perfect imitation. “When I was in the library three days back and returned the books that had been left in the Undercroft.”

He blinked. “That was you?”

Though she offered him no reply, the smile spoke for her.

“I went on for almost five minutes about the state of their binding.” He looked, a little mournfully, toward Ellana. “No wonder you didn’t laugh at my joke about the leather.”

“You give yourself too much credit,” Mira countered.

“Ha!” Bull laughed. “She’s got your sense of humour too, boss. I like her already.”

“Mira has been at the castle nearly two weeks,” Leliana provided, wearing a smile just satisfied enough to let slip her pride in the plan’s success. “During which time she has interacted with all of you in one form or another. And unless you’ve chosen to keep your awareness to yourself, this makes the deception a rousing success.”

“I’ll be damned,” muttered Blackwall. Decidedly impressed.

But Mira was quick to jump in and correct the assumption: “Almost everyone. It was suggested these encounters happen in the evenings… in case the ruse was not successful. If one of you saw
through it, it would be better to happen at a time and place when witnesses were few. Most everyone had regular haunts and schedules they kept to, but—” Her eyes found Solas’. “—I could not find you most nights, as you were neither in the rotunda nor your room past a certain hour. As a result, I was never able to speak with you.”

There was a meaningful pause, “It would appear you had…” — and the flicker of a knowing smile — “other commitments.”

Sera snorted. “Gross.”

But in the time since the conversation had shifted to introductions he’d had ample opportunity to find his footing. Once more a picture of his usual poise and composure, he deflected the teasing easily, and with his own smile to match. Turning to Ellana, “It seems she’s grown into her role rather well already,” he noted. “Perhaps we should invite her to join the birthday party.”

“Void fucking take you, Solas!”

* *

Another hour was spent laying out the minutiae of the coming months. Changes, conflicts, and the growing responsibilities Mira would take on as the day crept closer when she’d be working without a guide. She had already proven her worth: more than capable of seamlessly moving through the fortress, adopting the look and manner of the Herald so well as to not only fool a casual observer, but her friends as well. All with minimal observation of her target. With the opportunity to meet with her daily, the deception could only improve. There was no worry of her competence.

She just needed a haircut.

Some debate was had over the tasks that would go to her immediately versus what would be worked toward. From the small, meaningless, errands like book return and approving shipments all the way to sitting in judgement or travelling along the Imperial Highway. The shoes she’d fill required some breaking in, first. Over the preceding week she’d had a basic introduction to the ebb and flow of Skyhold’s rhythm, the ecosystem made of her workers and hands, but it would take more time spent within the walls to learn every note of the fortress’ song. To sing it by heart, and know her secrets — from hidden rooms full of cobwebs and musty tomes to the shortest route from the armoury to the stable. Only once a day spent as a double became second nature could they risk her fully donning the mask of the Herald of Andraste.

In addition to mimicry, Mira was also adept with both a bow and thrown daggers. Though nearly ten years Ellana’s junior her experience living on the streets had hardened her. An accomplished thief, she excelled at close combat and so required little training to match the Inquisitor’s skill.

By the end of the evening almost everyone had the chance to say something about the arrangement: suggestions, opinions, and a few good-natured jests. Mira rolled easily with the punches — and even threw a few. She made friends easily — a boon, as she’d soon be sharing them.

Among them, only Cassandra remained silent.

Listening attentively to all the plans, but refraining from offering her own impressions. Not yet. It did not feel right to partake in their merriment without first acknowledging the trespass she’d
committed. The outburst had shamed her — regret was writ openly in the heavy weight of her brow as she sat, quiet; adrift in thought.

When the meet was called and the room begin to empty she did not rise with the others. They all filed out with a steady stream of salutations and congratulations, offering her no less than four invitations to join them at the tavern, but she declined them all. Not only on account of Varric’s obvious intent to corner her for questioning, but more importantly for the chance to speak with the Inquisitor by herself.

Solas was last to leave. He almost did not see her there, still seated by the desk.

Almost offered Ellana a kiss goodbye in his oversight.

But stopped himself just before their lips brushed, as his eyes slid over her shoulder and saw they were not yet alone.

Though Cassandra politely looked away, he opted to kiss her hand instead, then offered a quiet, “Seeker,” as goodbye before he descended the stairs and left.

Once the door clicked shut, and only she and Ellana remained in the tower, she finally rose from the chair. Stepped confidently toward the Inquisitor and started strong with, “I would like to—” and then immediately hit a wall. Right out of the gate.

Fortunately, the Herald was patient while she mused. Brows knit and deep in thought, carefully considering the order of her words before ultimately deciding to go with something more simple.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last. “That was unworthy of me.”

Ellana smiled. Said, “It’s alright,” and meant it. “I’m not hurt.” Cassandra did not seem assuaged by how readily forgiveness was offered her; looking all the more troubled for receiving it. “You didn’t say anything I haven’t thought — or even spoke aloud — in the months I’ve had to sit with this. I suppose it’s obvious now that I’ve been keeping it some time.”

She ran one hand over the bump, more prominent now with all her bindings off, and the Seeker's eyes followed the movement. Part of her still struggling to process all she’d learned, despite the evidence before her.

“I’ve spent many nights awake considering every disgrace, dishonour, and missed opportunity this could mean for me.”

“The both of you,” corrected Cassandra. “You’re not alone in this.”

Though she’d meant it as comfort, an acknowledgment of their feelings for each other, it did not come out quite the way she’d hoped. Nothing was coming out the way she’d hoped. It sounded more like a condemnation of the both of them.

But Ellana understood regardless. “No,” she granted, with a meaningful look. “But you said it yourself, it would cost him little by comparison. That’s part of the problem. He’s an apostate and an elf: no title, no position to speak of — nothing tethers him to this cause and there are few expectations of his time here. I have everything to lose.”

Cassandra winced. “I did not mean to suggest you were being capricious in your role. You have always shown the highest regard for the Inquisition. I trust you would not abandon it easily. And truly, I am happy for you both; that you have found something to nurture in each other amid turmoil is a wonderful thing. You deserve peace where you can find it. I’ve—” A cough, to clear
the shy lilt in her voice. The heat was creeping back under her collar again. “—I know how it is to be swept away.”

Freckled cheeks pinked lightly; not so much from embarrassment as charm. The novelty of bliss, once secret, now shared. There was something to be said for the joy of having your love celebrated by another.

Cassandra continued, “I did not understand his anger, before. At camp. Solas is usually so calm. It seemed… disproportionate. I knew, by then, of your affair but I did not realize what he was protecting.” She looked away, lest the sentiment sound as awkward as she felt speaking it. “It is clear he cares for you very deeply. That is— I would—” Damnation and fire! “ I hope that my words did not suggest I believed otherwise. I was speaking to my own experience, not yours.”

There was a pause while Ellana considered her reply. Then, carefully, “I don’t think you need to worry about that,” she said. It was somehow both a relief and a disappointment. “You’ve spoken of your parents before, after they were executed. That you and your brother were raised by your uncle. I know your upbringing was not easy.

“I’d like to say that’s unlikely to happen to us, but…” A wry smile, to show the intent as gallows humour rather than an expression of genuine fear.

Cassandra tried to smile back — but the subject didn’t seem very funny in light of everything. “That is why I would like to formally offer myself. My service.”

Ellana raised a brow. “Are you not already in service?”

“When you leave to the safehouse,” she clarified. “You’ll be in need of a competant guard through the experience; better one less be told the reason why you’re leaving, when you can bring someone from your inner circle instead. I am requesting it be me.”

“You don’t have to make it up to me, Cassandra. You’ve—”

But, “Not for that reason,” she interrupted. Then, “Not entirely for that reason,” she corrected, after a time. “It is not only for the road, but also in case something more dangerous should befall you while you are away. I would feel more confident of your safety if you were accompanied by someone capable of dispelling magic, should the need to arise again.”

That struck surer, and stopped any further protest in its tracks. The silence between them stretched — too long — over the space of several breaths. Long enough that Cassandra began to worry she’d overstepped some unspoken boundary. This was birth she was asking to be present for, not merely a journey to Redcliffe. She wasn’t safeguarding a meeting. Surely an act so deeply raw and intimate could only be attended by those absolutely required to be there.

She’d gotten as far as opening her mouth in preparation of vomiting forth another awkward, tangled, mess of apology and insistence before—

“Request granted.”

—and what would surely have been an embarrassment of a reply died on her lips.

It took a moment longer for her to find her words. “I… thank you,” she stammered. Then surer; eyes hard. “I will not disappoint you.”

“I know you won’t. I have always had faith in your abilities — and your opinions — even when you choose interesting moments to offer them.”
The flush deepened to a crimson heat, well beyond her collar now and spreading quickly, high on her cheeks. Though it was not yoked with the same shame as before. “I will be sure to give my apologies to Solas, as well.”

Ellana laughed, and, “Good luck!” she quipped. “I imagine he'll be avoiding you for at least a week after that. I don’t know if you’ve noticed but he’s not terribly comfortable being the centre of attention. Getting him to join this meeting at all required several underhanded methods of coercion.” She snorted. “I’ll be lucky if I get him in a room with everyone ever again.”

Dryly, Cassandra offered a more artful suggestion. “If it would help, I could share with him the theory that you are distantly connected to Andraste’s line of daughters. It would make this circumstance a blessing upon you by the Maker himself — and he a holy figure, by proxy.”

That almost rendered her speechless. But then she laughed. Long and loud; she’d heard many things in her time as Herald but that was one of the more creative theories to force a Dalish elf into Chantry guise. “That sounds suspiciously like heresy, Cassandra. What would Mother Giselle say to hear such a story utilized just to avoid an awkward conversation?”

A small smile broke upon her blushed cheeks. It lent even more charm to the sheepishness.

“I won't tell if you don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Call this a housekeeping chapter. A lot of points I've wanted to get to for a while. :) We're getting close to the last few chapters, lads. Comments are mana from heaven - feed and water your writers.

Transliterations:

Da’vhenan = little heart, a play on da’len (little one)
Mythal enaste ma halani = Mythal’s grace, help me
“Diana, Darvas — look,” said the tall man, and he pointed further down the road, just as he had before.

But it was the first time he’d come into view.

An aging hunter. Evident in the wrinkles around his eyes and the grey streaks in his hair, brushed out from his temples where Andruil’s Vallaslin curled upon his spotted skin. The tattoo writ in umber ink to match his fading red braids. An unusual combination — it was visible even at a distance.

“What over there.”

A shorter man appeared at his side — much younger, not a man yet — with dark hair cut close above the points of his ears, and his face bare. Too young for tattoos. Not too young for battle scars. One cut through his lip. He pulled a longbow off his back and nocked an arrow. He was quick: well-practiced for a youth, but jumpy by comparison to his companion.

He turned a circle with the bow drawn. Scanning the surrounding trees. “Wolves?” he guessed.

The tall man shook his head. “Bandits, probably. The same ones who have been hassling the hunters lately. They’ve been known to ambush people on their way to the city if they get bored of dying by arrows. Come, tell me what you see.” He did not draw his own weapon, and walked at a leisurely pace. Eyes forward, arms loose. Moving with the quiet confidence of someone well-acustomed to travelling in dangerous places.

With a meaningful look at the other’s bow, “And put that away,” he added. “They’re long gone. If they were still here you’d have no time to use it, they’d be too close before you got a shot off. This part of the forest is thick; too many places to hide. Get your dagger, instead.”

The boy did as he was told. Quickly slid the bow back in place upon his back and unsheathed the knife at his belt.

Together the pair approached the scene: a spray of detritus that littered the quiet road. Among it a sack of ruined grain, some torn linens, and a few more personal belongings scattered with several broken pieces of wood. The source was not far — a travelling cart stood by the underbrush, upturned and smashed apart.

Do you know them?

No.

On the next glance, the grey streaks in the tall man’s hair had whitened, and multiplied. Taking up most of his crown save for a few lines of fading red at the very back. Now it was long, almost to his waist, and braided down around his shoulders in twisted pairs like ribbons wrapped with silver. His expression became less hard. The laugh lines around his mouth deepened.

Yes.
The boy, unchanged, skirted the edge of the road to get a better look at the wreckage. Careful not to disturb the dirt it laid in. His path took him directly in front of the bushes growing thick under the trees. Close enough to see his pants were ratty around the ankles and he wore no shoes. But the callouses on his feet had yet to thicken to a point where he could move about with ease, so he walked on his toes.

It was cold here.

And soon it would be dark. Surely his feet would freeze.

*He keeps his shoes at home. He thinks it makes him a better tracker.*

*And does it?*

*No. But he tells everyone so anyway.*

He didn’t look cold. Rather, he seemed completely unbothered by the chill, even as his toes sank into the mud when he crouched down just a few feet away by a ruined leather rucksack. He tugged on the drawstring that closed the top, loosening it, then began sifting through the main compartment. Moving on to the outer pouches after. The search found him little, only some linens and a handful of loose seed.

He picked up the bag and shook it, listening for the telltale jingle of coin in hidden pockets. Shaking his head, “Nothing,” he said with a click of his tongue. “Just clothes. A small blanket.”

“How have they been cut?” The tall man stood several paces behind him, observing.

“The clothes?” At his nod, the boy fished one of the pieces out of the bag — a large shirt — and held it up. There were two rips in the front. Too clean to be made by anything other than a deliberate swipe with a sharp blade. He looked surprised. “How did you know?”

The tall man replied, “When they attack elves on this road they make sure nothing is salvageable. They’ll take any coin they find, but leave the rest behind and destroy it.” He nodded at the remains of the cart. “You’ll probably find the missing wheel in the bush, cracked in half.”

There was something just off the side of the road, opposite the pair, partially hidden in the underbrush. Cloth and a soiled blanket, another rucksack, and something else. It appeared only once the boy turned and looked toward it.

He pointed. “There — a body.”

It wasn’t a body.

It was a deer.

It was a dog.

It was a pile of clothes.

It was nothing.

The boy walked over to the nothing, and with the point of his knife made a sweeping motion in the air just above the ground. As though gently moving something aside. Then he said, “You were right, hahren. Elf.”

The tall man gestured sharply with his chin. “There’s another over there, by that tree.”
There wasn’t. But there were arrows in the tree — the tips lodged deep in the trunk, two or three feet up. The bark had split around the impact, and from the tree’s wounds ran brackish trails of something dark, like blood. It collected on the ground in puddles mixed with mud and seeped into the grass. A slow, creeping, void that had nearly reached the road. Nearly reached the nothing under the brush.

The tall man stepped over to the tree and kneeled down. Touched his fingers to the arrow’s shaft and ran them end to end, testing its strength and examining the fletching. When he pulled his hand away it, too, was bleeding. He did not notice. “His throat was cut.”

“Why?” asked the boy. “They’re flat-ears. I thought they only went after the hunters?”

“Does it matter?” countered the tall man, and he stood. Walked back over to the wreckage of the cart. “They are elf enough — we’re all rabbits to them, da’len. Look at the tracks, here—” He pulled his own dagger out of his belt and flipped it around, expertly catching the blade between his fingers without even having to look. Practiced ease that spoke to years of experience.

He gestured with the handle. Tracing a line in the air a few inches above the ground. “The cart was kicked over, twice, before it was stepped on. It was full at the time. You can see the marks here where the sacks fell off.” He drew a circle around a depression in the mud, not quite touching it.

The dagger began to melt into his hand.

Blade first, and then the handle. Slowly disappearing beneath his skin, split and thinning, which grew until it had consumed it entirely. His fingers lengthening, sharpening, until he was left with a set of needle claws. Some chimera of man and blade.

All the while he spoke as though nothing were amiss. “If this had been a typical robbery they would have taken everything out first, then searched it for valuables. And they wouldn’t have bothered to cut up the clothes. They knew they didn’t have anything. It wasn’t even personal, it was just an insult. These two were probably killed before they knew what was happening. Done in by the first volley.” He pointed a clawed hand at the nothing. It dripped blood and darkness onto the grass at his feet. Onto his shoes. “See how they’re all in their backs?”

I don’t want to see.

Then ask it to stop.

“They didn’t even fight?” asked the boy.

The tall man made a disapproving noise low in his throat. Not quite a growl. “Even if they carried weapons, flat-ears can’t use them — they’re mostly for show. Check that one, tell me if you can see how long ago this happened.”

There was red on the boy’s hands now, too. From the ragged tears on his arms and slashes across his wrists. As if he had been mauled by something terrible. Something that was still near.

Wolves.

Demons.

His skin had become sallow, then pale and bloated. Wet with rivulets of pink-tinged water that seemed to squeeze from every pore.

There was blood pooling upon the dirt beneath him, and smears on the road — a trail — from
where he’d tried to crawl out of the brambles toward...

Where she crawled out of the brambles...

Where nothing crawled. There was no trail.

*If you continue to try and change a scene they currently occupy you will only empower them.*

*Go away* — came a thought. Followed then by, *I’m cold.*

*You are not. Think — where are you?*

The boy sheathed his knife and reached out to the nothing. To touch it. His hand hovering in the air for the space of a breath — and then he hesitated and drew it back. Held it, curled, against his wet mouth to hide an uneasy frown. He looked back over his shoulder at the tall man, who still stood by the remains of the cart, the darkness growing his limbs into long, violent, things and his thin hunting leathers hardening into a layer of sickly green chiton.

“Go on, Darvas,” the tall man said, and his voice was not kindly anymore. It echoed, and warped, and rolled. It hung in the air. It made everything worse. “It’s not going to bite you.”

In the far distance, deep in the heart of the woods, something howled. Something screamed. Night was falling. The shadows had begun to crawl out of the roots of trees; twisted, stretching columns of darkness that reached across the road like long fingers. Snuffing out the last flickers of light ray by ray. Inch by precious inch.

The gathering dark met with the void from the tree and together flowed into the space beneath the nothing, filling it in with inky black, until it had made visible the outline of a body face-down in the mud.

But it wasn’t a body.

It was a shadow.

It was a trick.

*It wasn’t…*

Then the boy touched his mouth and his lips began to crack and curl, pouring water from the gaps between his teeth, pushing forward. The scar on his face split open, tearing upward through his cheek and into a blighted eye. His voice, when he spoke, sounded tinny and high. Like the screams in the woods. “What if there are Shades? Keeper says—”

“If they were possessed we’d have seen it already,” interrupted the terrible man — sharper now, and taller. The ichor at his feet reaching out with thick, stringy, tendrils, and spreading fast. “Demons are not quiet, and are rarely intelligent enough stake an ambush. Keeper has not fought wraiths in a long time, and relies on her superstition over memory.”

Then he wasn’t a man anymore. And in a hollow, empty, voice he said, “Besides, there are worse things in the forest.”

“Bears,” provided the boy in a screech, falling to his knees. The darkness leapt from the dirt like whips and chains that fastened to his wounded wrists, tearing them open, and revealing skin of grey beneath as it pulled him down into the earth. “And giant spiders.”
Outlaws and raiders.

Darkspawn.

The lingering ghosts of the forgotten and the damned. Cursed things that lived in the deepest dark. Devils out of the scary stories used to frighten children and keep them tucked safe in bed.

_You can make them leave, but you must do it soon. You cannot let them touch you._

They were all there, in the rolling abyss. Just beyond the road. Beasts made of nightmare and shadow. Hungry, horrible, with eyes that glowed and teeth that gnashed. Claws like knives scraping along the ground as they walked. A spectral procession of Fears and Terrors guarding the boundary of twilight as it pushed through the forest. Consuming everything in its path and turning it to ash.

Soon there would be nothing, and she would join it.

_I can’t. I can’t do anything!_

_You can._

The Terror turned its stretched, thin, body toward the road and stepped out upon it. Dripping maggots and void with every jerky, stuttering movement.

_Stop it, stop it, stop it._

The boy opened his mouth full of crooked rat teeth and began to scream. Loosing a blast of cold that froze the ground around him. The scatter of lost and broken things disappearing, slowly, under his ice. Removing them from memory, from history, until they and all who'd touched them never existed at all.

_Stop it—!_

A spidery hand of Terror reached, fingers wide, ready to grab hold and pull her deeper into Nightmare.

_“Stop!”_ she screamed aloud.

And then it did.

The command burst from her not in voice, but in form, like a shockwave. A ripple of green that snapped against reality itself. In a blink it had banished all the terrible things that had gathered for their feast. And when she looked again the darkness had passed. The demons were gone — turned to harmless mist. The oppressive presence they brought with them, instantly lifted. One moment there, the next not… and she could see clearly what truth lay beneath the lies fear had sown.

This was not a place of death and horror… instead, just a place.

An empty road at dusk in a forest like any other. Full of creaking trees that swayed, gently, in a crisp breeze. No men or monsters lived here. No carnage. The wreckage had vanished along with them; leaving no trace behind. Not a single swipe or footprint marred the dust — even where the tall man had read signs of an ambush — it was like it never happened.

The scene lay still and untouched. Lovely even, with a cast of red-gold filtering down through the canopy from the setting sun. Distant birdsong played amid the trees, and all around was the smell
of fallen leaves.

Very good, said the voice. It was easier to hear it now with all other distractions gone.

It was comforting.

It was suspicious.

It was… someone?

“Will they come back?” she heard herself ask. Somehow without breath or mouth to speak.

_Not likely. You have banished them for now. You are safe._

That was wrong. They always came back. There were always monsters, here. It was always too cold in this forest, and it was dangerous to listen to things that came bearing promises. Someone had said so, once.

This was a trick, like the shadow.

_I don’t believe you_, she thought, and though she was sure she did not speak it aloud a reply came regardless.

_You do not have to take me at my word. Stay as you are, if you like — no harm will come to you — but you can only learn to keep the demons at bay permanently through greater understanding._

She peered up and down the road, looking for the source of the voice, but saw no one else. And though she could not see beyond the tree-line the scene felt too lonely for someone to be hiding there. The voice was not here with her, not in flesh at least.

Instead, it was everywhere — and nowhere.

“Where are you? Are you real?”

_I am, but you will not see me until you choose to bring me in. You’ve created this space, and so if I enter it without your invitation my will may change it._

“How do I invite you?” It bothered her that her own voice sounded ragged and small by comparison to theirs. There was no weight in her words. No surety.

_You must find where you are first. Focus on the physical. Once you are a participant in the scene, rather than merely an observer, the ability to influence its boundaries will come more naturally._

“If you can talk to me, you can appear to me too,” she argued. Surely their omnipotence granted them that. “If you can change this why don’t you just do it?”

She knew the smile, somehow, without seeing it. It was in the pause before they answered.

_I could, but then you would not learn how to do so on your own. And that would defeat the purpose of this exercise. Additionally, the experience would be extremely disorienting — to pull from one’s control to another. Better that you remain the architect. Start with something small. Think carefully: what do you feel on your skin?_

Though there was a petulant and not-insignificant urge to refuse them on principal, there also
appeared to be no real danger in playing along. So she turned her attention inward, and thought.

It came to her slowly. A gradual shift of awareness from the environment around her, to a more intimate knowledge of herself. Instead of simply understanding she had a body — parts and limbs — she had to take the time to acknowledge them. Think on each individually. Recall the way it felt to sit, to tire, to reach, or walk; to cry, and want for something.

She had eyes. A head. And could look around by moving them. She had a perspective, and a body to raise if she wanted to change it. Arms to crawl, and knees to skin. Hunger to gnaw. A heart to stop beating, if she remained much longer.

With that understood, the boundary of perception extended outward and sensation followed.

She felt.


“I’m cold.”

No smile this time. This was an answer she’d given before.

Alright. Why?

The answer came to her instinctually. “I should have chosen something warmer,” she said, “but I wanted to wear this instead. There are blankets in the bag, but it’s too far.”

The beautiful dress she loved so much was stained grey and brown. It was torn. It had a ribbon, once. Wove into the hem. Now it was soiled and ruined. She cast her eyes down upon her bare arms and mourned the ratted sleeves that gave them such poor cover.

Where is the bag?

The pack was on the road, nearby. The boy had grabbed it.

No — he would grab it later, when he arrived. He wasn’t there yet.

There was an order to these events she didn’t quite understand.

The bag appeared when she thought on it, sitting by a puddle. Not far — though she was still not close enough to get to it. And if she moved the brambles would dig deeper in her skin. She was surrounded by them.

That was a location. “I’m in the bush, by the road.”

She squeezed her arms tighter around her knees. Tucked them as close as they would come, as tight as she could manage, to smother the hunger pangs. Everything was sore and stiff from sitting so long; even the scrapes and bruises that stung had gone painfully numb. There were purple marks all up and down her calves and arms, like fingerprints, and she felt as meat must when tendered for feast. The cold had settled deep in her bones and was beyond hope of remedying, not with mud caked on her feet and along the backs of her thighs.

Soon she’d sleep — she was already so tired.

In that oblivion lay a hope the chill would take her before the animals did. If her last thoughts could not be of peace, they should be of pride: she would not bare her neck for slaughter. She
would not die screaming.

But there was no pride in dying alone and afraid, either. So she wished for someone to be with her for the end.

In lieu of a friend, she cursed her would-be scavengers: *I hope the wolves choke on my bones.*

“You would not make much of a meal,” said the voice — and their hand appeared before her. Open, easy; an offering between a veil of parted thorns. Her eyes traced a path from fingers to wrist, shoulder, chest — beyond the sleeve of a woollen tunic — to a familiar face. Somehow his presence was comforting even with the immediate and profound awareness that he did not belong here. This place was private. No one should be here.

Then he smiled, and instantly that nagging sense of familiarity clicked into place.

“Solas?”

The smile widened, and he nodded. She slid a dirt-stained hand into his. Small and chubby by comparison to his own — with dimples on her knuckles — it barely fit his palm. Disappearing completely in his fingers when he grasped it firmly.

She frowned. “Why are you so large?”

He ducked his chin, “I am not,” he replied, and gently pulled. She allowed herself to be lifted to her feet — up and up, growing as she went — until she’d risen beyond the brambles and stood tall on bared feet. Now only head shorter than he, and their hands grasped palm to palm. “*You were very small.*”

Solas gave a small tug, to urge her out onto the road, and she cautiously followed his lead. Though still donned in the ratty, stained, clothes, that had grown with her — as much as torn things could — she was not as chilled as before. Growing warmer with each step.

When they’d reached the middle of the road he asked, “Do you recall why we are here?” It was deliberately vague: she had to remember on her own.

It took a moment to come back to her, and then only in pieces without a clear grasp of what was before or after.

“I gave you permission to enter my dreams. You thought demons may be behind the disturbances, and wanted to help. They’ve been worse since…” Glancing down found her belly swollen. The seams of the dress adjusted to fit, as though it had always been this way. “I often don’t remember them when I wake — you said that meant I was not lucid. I had to learn how to guard myself. To fend something off, if I was targeted. Is that what this is? Just a bad dream?”

Solas shook his head. “No, this is a memory. However, parts of it have been manipulated by Fear and Despair for the purpose of exerting some control over you.”

“Whose memory?” Before he could answer she cut in again, “My memory?” Her eyes scanned the scene for familiarity, but found none. Too deep in the forest for landmarks, mountains or towns to place it; this could be anywhere. “I don’t recall this at all.” It was just a place.

Ellana looked back at the bush she’d come from. The brambles pushed down in a ring away from the centre, where she’d sat, so they would not catch on her skin as she grew. His doing — though hers had found it. It seemed an unlikely location to favour, and she found she could not recall why she’d first chosen it.
With so many pieces missing and out of order, thinking on anything here was a disorienting experience.

Solas was saying, “I’m not certain which parts are fabrication. There is too much emotion associated with this scene to separate the grains of truth from its fiction. It seems you have been courted for some time, enough to allow them the opportunity to manipulate this in a way most suited to subdue you. It’s been very effective. They are unusually strong, perhaps due to prolonged contact, and the Anchor has made you a particularly appealing target.

“While this is not the first time you’ve attempted to gain control, it is the most successful. I have not seen you break the geas so quickly. It is also the first time the two individuals have manifested. I’ve heard their conversation before, but never seen them take form.”

That’s right, she remembered. They’d done this several times. Several nights. And it was always this road.

With that thread of memory pulled, another began to unravel.

“I recognize the older man,” she said, glancing at the tree that had been the site of bloodied arrows a moment past. They were gone now, the bark unmarked. “His name was Taren. He was of Clan Lavellan, an accomplished hunter. He was always very kind to me. But he passed about ten years ago.”

Solas considered. “And the boy?”

Ellana shook her head. “No, I’ve not seen him before.”

A brow raised. “Are you certain? Earlier it seemed as though you had at least passing familiarity with him. You spoke of an inclination toward bare feet, a detail you’d be unlikely to assign to a fearling — they are simple demons. Taren referred to him as, ‘Darvas’.”

“Darvas,” she repeated, testing the name on her tongue. Darvas. Darvas and Taren. A boy and his teacher; a hunter’s apprentice. No older than 16, with bared feet and ripped pants.

Prideful, she knew that much.

So eager to prove himself. He was never as careful as he should have been.

The sound of boy’s name carried with it Keeper’s tears. Then the smell of a fatted candle lit by the riverside. Torches held high by men and women as they combed dark waters. All memories that were dull and time-worn; rolling in slowly, like mist, and slipping into the spaces decades had left behind in their passing. So old she’d forgotten they’d ever existed at all.

“Wait — I do know him. I did,” she corrected, and felt the heavy weight of something like sadness drop into her stomach. Uncomfortable. “He drowned… trying to hunt a bear on his own. We searched for him but never found the body.” Ellana touched her fingers to her lips, recalling how she’d bitten them until they bled when she was told. Thought of his scar. She could still taste the iron. “I never cared much for him, so thought it had been my fault somehow that something happened.” Then, ashamed, she added a quiet, “I’d forgotten about him.”

Something about this place made it easier to find where even the deepest memories hid away.

“If his memory elicits grief, it follows that Despair would find it an appealing point of entry. He was also of Clan Lavellan, I assume?”
She nodded. “Yes. He was always saying he’d be the best hunter one day. Always bragging that
he’d been the one—”

“Look, hahren, I’ve found something!” the boy’s voice rang out behind her. When she turned
around she saw him crouching on the road, as before. Though this time not quite fully himself.
Translucent and shimmering, as if made of smoke.

He held something up. “Look at this!”

If there was once an object there, this place had not preserved it. Instead he raised an empty hand
— cupped, fingers parted — holding tight some long forgotten thing.

Solas laid a hand gently on Ellana’s shoulder. The boy’s image flickered. “What was it?”

“A toy,” she answered, not entirely certain where the knowledge came from but sure of it
nonetheless. Speaking it aloud did not change the scene. “A doll.”

“They may still be near — look around!”

The ghost of Darvas leapt to his feet and began to circle the area, slowly widening his path beyond
the road and into the trees. Ellana watched him jump from one to the next, moving aside thorny
brambles with a leather-wrapped hand and using his bow to prod at piles of fallen leaves. When he
disappeared behind the trunk of a particularly large oak, she followed after so not lose sight of him,
sliding out from beneath Solas’ hand.

“There are tracks over here,” came the hahren’s voice, from somewhere else. “Heavier than the
other ones. Someone was carrying something. Check the bushes.”

Darvas emerged from a cluster of trees, now whole and hale, and jogged back onto the road. He
looked to the place the nothing had been, by another bush — studying the emptiness an omission
had left — then backed up a few steps. With his bow he drew an imaginary line from there, across.

His eyes met hers. He saw.

“Here!” he cried over his shoulder, and ran toward her.

Then past her.

To the bush behind her, where Solas had first given his hand. There he crouched down and offered
his own. “Hello, da’len. What’s your name? Are you hurt?”

Taren approached. “A child?”

“A girl. Young. She’s alone.”

“In this air she’ll be frozen half to death, grab one of the blankets from—”

“Careful.” Solas’ voice was at her ear. Too close, and so sudden that it gave her a start. She
gasped, as if struck, and the boy and his master disappeared with it. Blown away like dust. When
she turned around Solas’ eyes held hers, wary. “You are becoming enthralled,” he warned.

“I’m fine,” she assured. He did not look convinced. “I just… I know what this was. This was when
I was found. Except I don’t have any memory of this. I’ve never had any memory of this. Not
really. Is this true?”

Carefully, “Whether or not you can immediately recall the experience does not mean it wasn’t
preserved,” he replied. There was an edge to his voice that spoke to his rising caution. This wasn’t what they were here for. “The demons drawn to you may even have initially come from the location of origin, and used that shared connection to find you here. As for it’s accuracy… that is harder to say. Events told from the perspective of a child are often hyperbolic, though not untrue per se. It’s also clear this was a traumatic memory, which makes it more difficult. There are parts you’ve worked to omit that have made better entry points, and with enough time demons can transform those entirely.”

She frowned. “What do you mean I’ve ‘worked to omit’?”

There was a long pause, then a sharp breath. “Forgive me, I should not have indulged the curiosity — that was careless. We can speak of this more in the morning if you wish, but to do so here before you have learned to control the setting more reliably would be unwise. Come,” he extended a hand, clearly intent to draw her further away, and for a second she saw someone else’s in its place. “The simplest way of maintaining a barrier against this type of incursion is to shift the underlying narrative of the setting, rather than attempt to rewrite it as something more powerful might. Overreaching will only cause more turmoil, so you will need to start small as before. The events that played out here are tied to distressing memories; try to assign the scene new ones.”

Her gaze lingered on the underbrush. The nothing and the shadow.

There was something there.

If she had the opportunity, she could reach out to it like Darvas had, and pull it from the dark recess it had slipped into. Find—

“Ellana.”

She snapped to attention. “Yes. Sorry. I’m listening.”

The offered hand was no longer a suggestion — “Do not lose yourself,” — so she took it. His touch was an anchor, and the temptation of omission less alluring once he’d led her just a few steps away.

Not gone, but dulled.

She did her best to follow the instruction. Bidding herself think of something else — anything else — that could happen on a quiet, unassuming, road such as this one. Flipping through old memories like the pages of a picture book. Solas made no suggestions; as before, his interference would assert his will upon an experience she was still struggling to interpret.

This would be so much easier if he could just impart it all to me.

His lips twitched just a little. Not quite a smile.

There was a rustle from the trees nearby. A flash of ruddy fur visible in the gaps between them. A soft snort, as gentle warning, before a hart stepped into the periphery. It was huge. Beautiful too, with its crown of heavy antlers. It took a few steps toward the pair before stopping to investigate a patch of dewy grass. Then lowered its head. It had not seen them.

A beast that size would feed a dozen, easy.

Ellana took a deep breath and let it out slowly, to centre herself, then held her next. Carefully pulled the short bow off her back, nocked an arrow, and raised it up. The creature continued to graze, unaware, as she closed one eye to aim.
A guiding hand touched her elbow, and lifted it. “Higher,” came the suggestion. “Remember what I said about keeping it straight.” There was a tap against the back of her knee. “Don’t lock them. And don’t close your eye.” She opened it again. A pause, to study the corrected form, then, “Better. Now aim—”

“For the neck, I know,” she said in a sharp whisper. “I’ve done this before.”

A quiet laugh. “I’ve been doing it far longer, da’len.”

“I’m not your ‘da’len’ — don’t call me that,” she hissed.

Fingers touched gently to the centre her stomach, above her navel, and pushed. A reminder to straighten her back. Then a finger drew affectionately down the side of her face to catch a wayward hair and tuck it behind her ear. “Well, I can’t very well call you hahren quite yet, can I? When you get to be my age everyone seems so young. You’re all my little ones.”

“Not. Me.”

Almost…

But her shoulders had tensed up again. It was messing up her draw. He pushed them down with both hands, a little firmer than was necessary, and again corrected her aim.

“Since you’re all grown perhaps I should be taking lessons from you? Better give them soon, though, before the hart knows you’re here and you miss your chance to show me all you know.”

As if on cue it twitched an ear.

She held her breath—

It shook its tail.

Flies.

—and she let it back out.

“Good,” he praised. “Now if only you could apply that patience to everything perhaps you would be the best hunter!”

“Stop talking!” she snapped, too loud, and this time the hart raised its head. For a hopeful few seconds it looked as though it might dismiss the interruption and return to its meal, but then it pointed its nose up. Scented her on the air. Turned, and quickly leapt back into the bush.

Frustrated, Ellana threw her bow upon the ground. “Now look what you did!” she yelled, and stomped hard enough to raise a cloud of dust. Far from intimidated, hahren only laughed, and the sound made her all the angrier. “You made me scare it—!”

But when she turned around, no one was there… and she was left staring at the empty road.

“—away.”

On the ground ahead lay an arrow. Solid wood — but balanced well. With its fletching made of thin, curled, strips of bark and the shaft covered in intricate scrolling patterns. It lay partially submerged in a puddle. She skipped over and picked it up by the tip so she could watch the water drip off the points and run through the whorls and lines.
“Shoot only when you’re sure, da’len. Otherwise you’ll waste your arrows,” said a voice somewhere behind her. “And if you lose another one I’m not carving you a replacement for a month.”

This voice was softer, and deeper — comforting like a warm blanket. It had lean arms and scarred fingertips.

“I won’t,” she lied, calling over her shoulder. One was lost just a day earlier. There were only four left. She slipped this one back into the pouch at her waist with the others. “I promise.”

“Don’t fall so far behind, come up here by the cart where I can see you,” said another. Her voice was sweet, like flatcakes and fried mushrooms. It braided hair, and played music.

“That’s right,” the warm voice added. “If you stray too far the monsters might get you.”

There was the quiet thump of a hand hitting a clothed shoulder. A laugh. “Don’t tell her that, she’ll believe you.”

She jogged ahead until she was in stride with the pair, each holding one handle of a cart filled with bags and packs. The wheels whining and squeaking as they turned. Axles made of knotted branches sanded down to size did not offer the smoothest ride, but it did well to carry their belongings.

“I’m not afraid of monsters,” she argued. Then, on second thought, “But… I should know what they are. So I can fight them if they come. I have a bow and a knife now!”

Another laugh, “What a brave girl,” said the man with the warm voice as he turned around. “My da’vhenan.”

His face was blank.

Then it looked like Taren.

Then like the elder at her first Arlathvhen who sang lullabies.

Then the father of her childhood best friend, who wove ribbons in her hair.

And the man in the clan she couldn’t remember, that smoked a pipe and fixed the holes in her shoes.

It looked like someone she missed. A pain in her chest. But with a wider smile, and eyes like hers.

“Would you even fight a demon?” he asked, and those familiar eyes darted side to side beneath a hand held to his brow. Making a show of searching the surrounding trees. “I heard there were some around here…”

Far from cowed, “I would kill it and make it my dinner!” she roared.

“Indulging this will only make you more vulnerable, Ellana, you must choose another…” someone said, to someone else.

“You can’t eat demons, they’re poison — like darkspawn.”

“Oh.” That gave her pause. She frowned. “Well then what good are they when they die?”

“Good for being one less demon to mess things up.”
The sweet voice was laughing again. Light, tinkling, notes that sounded like an old song. The lyrics hummed, long forgotten. “Peace of mind. Not much else.”

The cart jostled over an uneven stretch of road, and the bump loosed a crabapple from one of the drawstring bags. It rolled out of the back, onto the ground. She quickly tucked her toy bow between two sacks and ran off after, catching it just before it managed to disappear under a bush. It was soft, and brown on one side — almost mouldering — but the other half was still in tact. One of an armful in similar state stolen from an orchard they’d passed earlier that day. It would make their meal that night. Too precious to let even one escape.

When she wiped the dirt off on the hem of her dress it made a strange noise. Like the quiet zip of an arrow splitting the air before it hits its target. Curious, she wiped the apple again, but the noise didn’t happen that time.

Not until she held it to her mouth to steal a bite, just before her teeth broke the skin.

Then two times more, in quick succession.

There was a clatter behind her. A shriek. Then the strong hands with the scarred fingertips were suddenly around her waist. The whole world spun as she was lifted in the air, carried rough over a bent arm pushed into her stomach, not even for long enough to ask why before being dropped back into the bush where she started.

No, no, no, no…

The hem of her dress caught on the brambles and tore. There was blood on her arms, but not her own. The apple was rolling away.

“No!” she cried, and tried to reach for it, but he pushed her hands back down.

—"na, if you cannot…"

“Listen: don’t move, don’t say a word, not until I say so. Stay here until I tell you it’s safe.”

“I’m sorry, I only wanted a bite, please don’t be mad.” It all came out a jumbled mess, with tears and spittle at the corners of her mouth. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand. “I didn’t even get one — it’s okay.”

“Do you hear me?”

…hear me?

Her eyes slid over his shoulder, to where the cart was knocked over on its side. The grain had spilled — and the little pouch with the seeds. If they lost it all there’d be none to plant in the new garden, in the new home, where he said there was game still left to hunt that hadn’t died in the cold. She did not see the woman with the sweet voice before he grasped her chin between a thumb and forefinger and wrenched it back down.

“Don’t look there, look at me. Don’t leave this spot — not until I say — do you understand?”

Instead of an answer — instead of obeying — her eyes dropped to his chest. A circle of red bloomed on his shirt. “What is that? Is it—?”

He held her face in the cradle of both his palms. They were warm and wet. The air smelled like blood. “Do you understand?” She nodded, and he pressed his lips to her forehead. “Close your eyes
now, and don’t make a sound.”

Everything went dark.

Silent, but for the drumming beat of her pulse in her ears.

_One, two, three_, she counted. Hide and seek. Memory songs. The little rhyme she sang to count eggs for cooking.

To ten.

Then twenty.

_Thirty-one, thirty-two—_

_Can you hear me?_

There were flowers blooming. The scent was sweet and light on the air.

“Yes.” _Thirty—“—three.”_

“Three? Are you sure?” Solas asked.

She opened her eyes.

They were seated across each other, at a small table set in a stone gazebo. Solas held a spoonful of sugar over a teacup balanced on its matching porcelain saucer. Awaiting her say. “You normally only take one.”

“I…”

She didn’t remember being asked about the tea. She didn’t remember being here, or what she was thinking about a second ago, or what they’d been talking about before she got distracted…

Then, all at once, she did.

And she was embarrassed by her own poor attention. “Of course — one is fine. I’m sorry, I guess I got a little lost in my thoughts.”

“That’s alright,” he replied gently. Carefully. “You are tired…”

_And it can be disorienting_, her thoughts finished, as if she’d heard him say it that way before.

It was early evening. The sun hadn’t quite descended beyond the mountains, though the garden lanterns were already lit. She loved this time of day: when the reds and golds reached out across the Frostbacks and the light was dazzling. The snow sparkled like stars.

Normally there were a few others to witness it with her, when she walked here, but tonight no one else was in the garden. They had all gone for dinner, or to gather in the great hall.

“To witness Mira sit in judgement as Inquisitor,” provided Solas as he stirred, answering the question she had not yet asked. Or… perhaps just had.

He tapped the spoon twice against the rim of the cup before placing it on the saucer — the sound drawing her attention back to him. Passing the tea over, he warned, “Careful,” as she grasped the handle. “It’s quite hot.” His gaze flicked down to the bundle in her arms.
Heavy; her arm was starting to tingle with pins and needles. Ellana adjusted the sleepy weight upon her elbow and tucked the blanket’s edge a little tighter against her breast. Though it was a warm evening a chill blew in with the setting sun. Too cold for such tender skin. The babe had disappeared entirely in the folds of a hand-made shawl.

It was a gift. But from who, she could not recall.

Solas cut across the thought. “You were saying… about the hart the soldiers brought in?”

“Was I?” It was a gift. From her clan, to the Inquisition — a beautiful mount with a coat of russet. She remembered. “Yes, I went by the stables earlier and saw it. Dennet had a stableboy brushing out its fur when I arrived. It seems well-cared-for, and gave him no trouble for it. Normally they can be rather temperamental and aren’t suited to that sort of maintenance.” As she talked she brought the teacup to her lips and inhaled, deep, before taking a cautious drink.

It smelled of crabapples, but tasted sweeter.

A little too much so, even for just one spoonful. The second sip was better.

She placed it back down on the table. “It’s huge, though. Far larger than most of the harts I’ve seen before. I think we both could ride it with room for someone small in-between.”

He smiled. Said, “What good fortune. Perhaps one afternoon we’ll all take it out.”

Ellana dug her fingers beneath the satin edge of the blanket — “Yes,” — absently looking for a little hand to hold. Soft skin. Sleepy breaths. Buried somewhere under the folds. “It could feed a dozen, easy.”

The smile faltered. “Ellana,” Solas said, and the world seemed to narrow around the sound of her name on his lips. “We can go back to our room if you’re too tired to remain out here. Take tea on the balcony instead. It’s been a long day.”

“Maybe in a little while,” she replied off-handedly. Still searching. “But let’s go before the sun sets. I don’t want to spend another night here.”

Her fingers slid into something wet, and cold. When she pulled them free they were tipped in muck. Not soiled, but… mud?

It smelled like rot.

“What’s…?”

In her arms the bundle shifted and shook, but before she could tear back the blanket it collapsed in upon itself. Then erupted with dozens of shining black beetles, flies, and pupae. Carrion bugs that crawled out of every fold and gap in the weave. Some onto her arms and chest, others taking flight.

Startled, she leapt backwards, knocking over the chair. When it hit the stone floor it shattered into pieces of a broken travelling cart. The blanket dropped to the ground at her feet with a wet slop, oozing mud and decay. Bits of sticks and leaves brimming with worms.

The tea was gone and Solas was on his feet. He reached for her, but the voice of another made her spin away.

“That’s unfortunate.”
Taren stood at the edge of the garden between pots of herbs. Long braids of red slowly greying as he turned his face away, eyes closed. His face fallen in sorrow.

A sudden, sharp, pain in her side made her cry out. Grasping for it found the shaft of a cracked arrow. Thin, and poorly made. Its tip buried deep somewhere in the rounded swell of her womb. The blood beneath was old and dry; caked with mud. Like her hands, when she pulled them away.

“They could not even spare the unborn.” Taren whispered a quiet prayer of mourning. “Falon’Din guide both their souls.”

Then a hand came down hard on her shoulder. “Wake up.”

In the darkest hours, just before the dawn, the silence of Solas’ quarters above Skyhold’s garden was rent by her scream upon waking. Then the shuddering, gasping, breaths that followed when he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her to his chest for comfort.

“It’s alright,” he soothed in the dark. “You’re awake now. It’s over.” Always so unshakable in the face of Nightmare, in all its forms. She clung to that like a lifeline.

She said nothing of his hand so quick to find hers and hold it tight.

And neither did she sleep again that night.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Diana = stop
Hahren = elder/teacher
Da’len = little one
Da’vhenan = little heart

Names chosen with the help of this link:
https://dalishious.tumblr.com/post/156601840687/making-up-elven-names
No one is more surprised than me by how quickly this went up. I guess quarantine is good for something.

“If those bags under your eyes get any larger you’ll need a pair of shoes to match,” said Dorian. Loud enough to rise above the din as they approached the bustling courtyard. “And the hood isn’t helping matters, either.”

Below, swords collided with shields, hammers with horseshoes, and occasionally people with one another as they carried buckets and sacks for morning deliveries. The hours immediately after dawn were always the most lively; every corner of the fortress hummed with activity. A medley of sound, song, and smell. No better time was there to get lost in the crowd than when Skyhold was starting her day.

Ellana pulled her scarf up over her chin. Tucked its loose edges into the collar of her thick coat to keep it in place while they walked. “Are you trying to tell me I look tired?”

He gave her a look. “I’m going to assume I don’t need to tell you.”

They passed a group of soldiers leaning on the parapet, trading stories and a carving knife. Slices of a fragrant citrus shared between them while they regaled each other with tales about their recent patrol the Hissing Wastes. Someone made an off-colour joke about the Venatori, jabbing the knife into the fruit for dramatic effect, and a chorus of laughter followed.

None seemed to notice the pair, but Ellana still waited until they were out of earshot to continue.

“I am tired. Turns out tying up loose ends so that I can abscond for a few weeks is a big job — who would have thought?” The first part was sarcastic, but the next was sincere. She lead it with a sigh. “I’ve spent nearly every evening since she arrived training Mira on how to bullshit her way through topics I barely understand myself. Thankfully, she’s a quick study and surprisingly good at playing politics. I actually think she’ll be just fine when travelling, so long as there are others there to guide her. And she can hold her own against a threat. Did you know she has nearly perfect recall of poisons? She even knew a few I thought were exclusive to the Dalish.”

The question was rhetorical, so he didn’t answer it.

“When I’m not doing that I’m locked for hours in the war room with Cullen directing troops to investigate Corypheus’ movements. Ever since the temple he’s been off licking his wounds, and unfortunately every rumour we’ve chased trying to root him out of hiding have all been a bust. The last month has given us some promising leads, but also the possibility that what’s left of his forces may be regrouping for another push… which is something I cannot afford to deal with right now.”

“What auspicious timing he has,” Dorian commented with a frown. “You don’t think that’s on purpose, do you?”

She shook her head. “No, Leliana has a number of agents listening for whispers and this one—”
she said, with meaning. “—has yet to surface with any credibility. For now, it appears he has more important things to do than send someone to look in my bedroom windows. In the meantime, all I can do is keep sending forces to harry every nebulous report of cultist activity in hope of keeping him pushed back long enough to grant me the time I need to recover.”

“Well, soon you’ll have a lovely forced vacation in a house in the woods somewhere, and you’ll spend a few weeks not having to think about that. Plus, getting eight hours of restful sleep each night. I’m sure it will be just what you need.”

Though it was clear he was being facetious, “Right,” she deadpanned. “Because that’s exactly how that works.”

They parted, briefly, on their way down the stone staircase that led into the yard, to make room for a runner carrying a rolled parchment. Ellana paused her descent long enough to watch them disappear through the doorway. They’d passed by without a second glance.

Despite his complaints about it the hood did work: she’d not been recognized.

She nodded in their direction. “Do you think that’s for me?”

“No today it isn’t,” Dorian replied, matter-of-fact. “Today you’re spending as one of the common folk! Aren’t you supposed to be enjoying that?”

She was. It was one of a growing many to come where her duties were entrusted to her advisors and her double.

In many ways a relief — it gave them all ample opportunity to judge where preparations were thorough or thin — but in others a bother. Beyond the inherent discomfort of leaving her tasks to another, she’d become accustomed to being busy. The off days were a bit of a bore. There were only so many things to do when one had no job to keep them occupied. Walkabouts had become a good way to pass the time, though her friends rarely joined her on them. Today she’d requested Dorian’s presence specifically.

“If it helps,” he was saying, “imagine it’s a proposal of marriage from some besotted half-wit in Montsimmard and let someone else do the honour of throwing it in the censer.”

“And if it’s a declaration of war?” she teased.

“Well, they’re probably not going to attack until later this evening — who organizes a siege before breakfast? — you still get to play the pauper for a few more hours.”

She smirked. “For now I’m merely a tired elf escorting a Tevinter mage through the market.”

He considered that. “Hm — that’s a good point. Now you’ve got me worried. Maybe perk up a little; try to look like you’re thrilled I’ve not made you carry my shopping. Remember: I’m the nice magister.” It won him a laugh and, satisfied, he grinned. “But enough Inquisitor talk, you’re not supposed to be thinking about it. What is it you were so eager to show me?”

Once at the bottom of the stair they continued on into the small market, evading a run of chickens herded through by a teenage stablehand with his pockets full of corn. Stalls had begun setting up for the day. Proprietors traded good wishes while they unpacked chests and laid out their wares for display.

One merchant in particular had attracted a small group of curious onlookers. A new addition, looking overdressed for the locale in their Orlesian standard, had brought up imports from Antiva
and Orlais. Silks, jewels, and opulent trinkets made them a novelty in an otherwise practical business where preserves and ore were the most profitable trades. The waiting patrons were eager for a chance to browse the wares before the proprietor realized their poor choice of location (and season) and inevitably left for greener pastures.

As they passed it by Dorian rolled up onto his toes for a better look, but Ellana’s eyes were on a different prize than exotic goods, and she carved a determined path through the concourse with him close in tow. Denying him the opportunity to sate his curiosity.

She stopped by the well in the yard next to the stables and took a seat on the edge. Then patted the spot next to her. “Here,” she said, as invitation. “We’re having a bite to eat.”

Dorian paused to brush a layer of dirt off the stone wall with his hand. Frowned skeptically at the result, visibly unchanged, before turning the look upon her for a moment of unspoken disappointment. But still sat. Only a little put off by her choice of location.

When she failed to offer any further explanation of what they were doing there, he made a guess. “Are we here to watch the horses?”

Ellana produced two apples from a pouch tied to her belt and held one out. “Not quite.”

He took the offering. Buffed it on the lapel of his shirt. “Did you acquire another one of those horrifying half-dead creatures? If so, I’m sorry to say I will not be staying for the show. They are absolutely terrifying — worse than the nuggalope, and that’s saying something — I’d like to put as much space between it and me as possible. I’d tell you to put the poor thing out of its misery but judging by the sword through its jaw somebody’s already tried that once and the results were mixed.”

Ellana rolled her eyes, then gestured to the barn. Just watch, said her expression.

“All right, alright,” he moaned. And sighed. Then added, “I’m serious about the nuggalopes though. Have you seen their horrible feet? I’ve spent nights awake trying to figure them out. If one reared up and attacked, would it be kicking or punching?”

“Hush, Dorian.”

He did. They ate in that companionable silence for several moments; Ellana watching the open barn doors while Dorian grew increasingly impatient waiting for something interesting to come out of them. Only once he came dangerously close to revisiting his opinions on nugs to break the monotony did something finally appear.

A young woman walked out. She was human, fair, modestly-dressed, and barely out of her teenage years. Carrying a bucket full of grain. Her long hair all piled up on top of her head and wrapped in a knotted rag to keep it out of the way. It was clear she’d been long at work, though it was still early in the day; the hours counted in dirt smears on her cheeks and stains on her clothes. For those who wore the mantle of castle staff the day started well before the dawn.

She grabbed a handful of feed and spread it upon the ground in front of the doors. Immediately drawing the attention of some nearby geese as well as a flock of birds perched high on the wall. When the bucket was empty she clapped the dust off her hands, wiped them on her apron, and went back inside.

One of the geese gave chase to the birds the instant her back was turned.

“Fascinating,” Dorian said around a bite of apple. A flavour he clearly appreciated about as much
as the view. “I’ve always wanted to spend a day bird-watching. Who needs the theatre when you’ve got an ornery goose willing to kill its fellows over breakfast?”

As if on cue a few of the birds returned just long enough to be hissed at, and took off with the warning. On toward the Herald’s Rest in hope of finding a meal with less opposition.

Laughing, “It’s not the geese, Dorian — did you truly not notice?” Ellana exclaimed. But he looked lost, and so, “The girl,” she urged with a tilt of her head. “Look again when she comes back out.”

Several more minutes passed before she returned. This time with a heavy sack slung over one shoulder, on her way to the laundry. It was only once she passed them by that he finally got a good look and caught on to what had made her worth observing.

There was a slight rounding of her otherwise thin frame, just below the hem of her dress. A small, but notable, bump.

With brows high on his forehead, Dorian spun in place to watch her disappear into at the servant’s entrance behind them. Started to ask, “Is she…?” but let the rest go unspoken.

“I was only looking for it because midwife let something slip during her last visit,” Ellana answered quietly, making a point not to gawp at the door. “I’ve spent every free minute since trying to figure out who it could be, but it ended up being Mira that pointed her out after I asked if she’d noticed anyone. She saw her caring for the horses when she’d been to speak with Dennet. Told me yesterday. The girl’s name is Annika, she’s young, and she came up last year with the latest wave of kitchen staff so I’m assuming her partner is — or was — also here. Beyond that I’m not sure what her story is. At a guess I’d say she’s nearly as far in as I am, but she’s taller, so she carries it better.”

Dorian was still staring at the door. “Will you say anything to her?”

“Are you joking?” she hissed. “What would I possibly say! ‘Surprise! I’m actually the Inquisitor and I think our bastard children might be born around the same time. Since we’ll both be raising them in a fortress completely unsuited to family life perhaps we should get together sometime and compare notes?’”.

He snorted. “Well, you’ve thought about it enough to have that prepared.”

“Of course I’ve thought about it! That doesn’t make it any more appropriate, though. Even if I wanted too—”

“And you—”

“And it wouldn’t matter if I did,” she cut across in a clipped whisper. Fixing him with a glare beneath the shadow of her hood. “There are a hundred reasons why I can’t. First and foremost because she’s not vetted, nor trained to receive sensitive information — it’s too much of a risk. If this entire thing collapsed because I wanted to swap stories with a pregnant stablehand Leliana would have me drawn and quartered.”

“Alright, that’s fair.” Dorian tapped his fingers against his lips, thinking. “I wonder if there’s anyone else? There are other children here — yes?” He paused. “I feel like I should know the answer to this question given how long we’ve been living here.”

“A few…” Ellana began, and her eyes slid toward the market behind them. He followed her gaze to a man in the midst of opening his stall with the help of a young girl. Bent over a chest, he passed her a set of daggers one by one. Each then taken, cleaned, shined, and carefully arranged upon the
table. There was enough of a resemblance between them to imply they were family.

“Less than a dozen. Those who came up with survivors from Haven, or the children of staff who made the journey later. A few apprentices. But they’re all old enough for work. No one was born here, of that I’m sure. I’ll be the first — and if that girl ends up leaving for a more suitable home I’ll be the only.”

It was almost wistful. A longing unspoken, but implied, both in the weight she lent the words and the way she watched the man and his daughter greet their customers with matching smiles. There was community there; with him, with the stablehand. Connections she couldn’t make.

All Dalish children were raised by the clan. Mothers had each other for support, the advice of their elders, stories, and wise women to guide them. There was always someone with an ear to listen and a hand to hold. Families were so much more than simply parents. It wasn’t so among Humans — nor in this home she’d made with them far from the woods that raised her.

Duty offered poor respite from her yearning for the village, and with the end fast approaching and her responsibilities dwindling there were precious few distractions from that ache. Pining, unexpectedly, for the vestiges of a simpler life and what was left behind. The path not taken.

Dorian’s expression softened as he glanced between her and the market stall. Trust that a friend would hear all she’d left unsaid. “I understand the need for discretion, but surely there’s also something to be said with respect to your mental state. You shouldn’t have to be alone in this.”

“I’m not alone in this,” she countered. A little sharply for the assumption. “I have Solas.”

But his own reply cut just as quick. “Do you?”

When she turned on him, brow knit and tongue ready with something fierce, he raised both hands. Cut her off before she struck. “I’m not accusing, I’m just asking,” he defended. “I know you two aren’t much for public displays unless you’re arguing, and of course your position makes that harder, but I haven’t even heard much of that lately. To be honest I don’t know that I’ve ever seen a couple spend less time together in anticipation of such a transformative event. While I admit I’m not his closest confidante — I’m honestly not even sure who would qualify for that — I’ve never known him to be much of the doting type. You might not enjoy ever being dependant on others, but there are certain times a little caretaking is called for: this is one of them. I want to make sure that’s happening. Call it friendly concern.”

“That’s an awfully presumptuous start to ‘friendly concern’,” she said thinly. The two men had never been close; this toed a line of judgement he had no experience to speak to.

“Presumption is all I have when you tell me next to nothing,” he snapped in return.

He rarely spoke of anything with such gravity, or to her with such bite, and it briefly took her aback.

An opportunity he capitalized on with a list of examples counted on his fingers. “You’re barely sleeping, hardly eating, regularly unwell, woefully underprepared, spontaneously developed a sensitivity to magic—” That one he gave its own hand’s worth — one finger for each word. “—and are about to enter the next phase of your life in the loving company of the most emotionally constipated man I have ever met in my entire life. Above it all you also have a rather troubling tendency to turn around and walk away from anything that has the slightest potential to make you uncomfortable. Present conversation included. Don’t think I can’t see that look in your eye that says you’re two seconds away from telling me where to stuff it.
“And that’s just the things I can tell on my own! Rather than allow your friends to ease the weight of those burdens you have just grown increasingly distant. Is anyone there to hold your hand through this? Is he? I honestly have no idea! I haven’t pushed out of respect, but don’t think that means I haven’t noticed. You are the dearest friend I have.” It was near to pleading. “I care very much about your state through this and I’m willing to endure a little wrath if it means pushing you into giving me a few real answers.”

By the time he paused for breath the guilty heat that crept its way up the back of her collar had left her flush with shame. Bit her cheek in stony silence to keep from snapping out a rebuttal that would only prove his point. The lashing hit unexpectedly hard if only because it was so deserved. He was right, of course — and she did want to tell him to stuff it — but that didn’t make it any easier to hear. Remorse and embarrassment stirred uncomfortably in her gut.

Perhaps she and Solas really were made for each other: two people who could dance circles around uncomfortable truths rather than speak to them.

The struggle did not go unnoticed. And so, belatedly, he added, “All I ask is that when you do go off, try not to hit me in the face.”

When she laughed, he looked so terribly fond that it managed to dissolve some of the tension.

Still the expectant pause felt heavy between them, and went on too long while she weighed a response that wouldn’t dismiss him outright. Or result in causing more hurt than she already had.

There was so much — and so little of it she could say without being disingenuous.

Worse, the more she chose to keep hidden, the more she sympathized with Solas’ evasiveness. It wasn’t a good feeling, to be both supplier and recipient of all the same lies he’d told.

When she could stand to look him in the eye again she said, with as much sincerity as she could muster, “There are some things I cannot share, Dorian — not yet — no matter how much love I have for you. You will just need to trust that there are good reasons for that and know that it will change as soon as it’s able. But as for the rest, you’re right: I haven’t been very receptive lately. You’ve been a good friend and I’ve been a rather poor one in return.”

Without hesitation, “I’ll forgive you only if you promise to name a son after me,” he replied.

The comment startled a bark of laughter from her.

Undeterred, he continued, “It might not be Elven but I think it rolls off the tongue better than ‘Solas’, don’t you think? What does that mean anyway? ‘Solas’. Probably rubbish.”

“Pride,” she said, still laughing. “It means ‘pride’.”

He blinked. “Does it really? How apt. Praise be to his parents for their gifted foresight.”

Sometime far in the future, when all was revealed, she’d be sure to remind him of that comment. He’d likely find it as funny in retrospect as she did now.

“But your acknowledgment only gets you so far, my dear, and I’m not looking for an apology. I would settle for just a conversation with my friend.” He touched a hand to her elbow and gently squeezed. A small gesture — careful, amid so many eyes and ears — but one that spoke to the depth of his sincerity. She laid her hand atop his own in reply, and squeezed it back. “If total transparency is off the table, how about just a mostly-honest summary of how things are going? Allow me, oh—” There was a brief pause while he feigned consideration of a list he almost
certainly had prepared in advance. “—three questions.”

But he was earnest, and so, “Three questions,” she affirmed.

He held up a finger. “First: how are you really? Both you specifically and as a pair.”

“That counts as two questions.”

“One and a half at worst,” he argued.

But she wasn’t looking for a way out anymore. So she laughed — a little hollow — at her own expense. “Ill-prepared.” It was an answer both terrifying and relieving to admit. “I’m not entirely sure I’ll be any good at this.”

“No one starts out good at it. It’s the sort of thing taught by experience. You’ll blunder your way through making dozens of mistakes, just like everyone else who walked this path before you, but I have confidence you’ll do it wonderfully. Don’t throw them in a Fade rift, or feed them to wild dogs, try to avoid the temptation of ritual blood magic, and you’ve already got a leg up on the competition.”

“That easy?” she asked with a soft smile. It was reassurance that did not fall on deaf ears.

“You could do it in your sleep,” he replied confidently. “And may, actually, for the first few months. I’ve been told it’s terribly exhausting. It’s the only piece of advice I’ve heard repeated enough to know well: sleep when they sleep.” Then he tipped his chin and pitched his voice lower. “Second part of the question now.”

“As well as can be expected, I think. He does dote, for one — just not publicly. We may not spend endless hours together but it is not for lack of trying. You have to understand, there are a lot of considerations…”

The phrasing made her wince.

Damned if she wasn’t sounding more like him all the time.

She pushed on. “Neither of us have really been in a real relationship before, and I’m not even entirely sure we could use that word to describe whatever this has been most of the time. I love him dearly, as I know he loves me but it’s—”


“—Complicated,” she settled on. This part was harder: acknowledging the divide between them without making it sound as impassable as it sometimes felt. “He has led a very different life than I have, and there are certain traits those experiences instil in a person that can make things… harder. The side you see is different from the one I do, he does not often show it. Really, this may be something you and I have in common: the love of someone accustomed to only telling a certain version of the truth.”

To love a liar, she meant.

He raised a worried brow. “I’m going to pretend I know what that means.”

This meandering excuse for an answer was getting worse, not better. Inwardly, she begged herself to come to a salient point.
“I am not afraid to be left alone, if that is what you’re getting at. If anything, our shared inexperience and stark terror necessitates that we depend on each other to get through it. We may not be the most likely pair, but our feelings are genuine. I am happy with him — even when he challenges me.”

It was as close to the truth as she was willing to speak, for now.

And it seemed to soothe any lingering doubts. “Alright, thank you,” Dorian replied gently. “That’s comforting.”

“Plus, the sex is amazing.”

“And that’s bewildering and unnecessary. I can’t imagine—” He stopped. Wrinkled his nose. “You know what? I’ll just leave it at that. Pushing on, number two: what is this business with the magic? Have you had this the whole time in some manner or is it entirely new?”

The way he leaned in, just a little, betrayed any attempt to feign casual interest. There was a distinct possibility he’d been waiting for an opportunity to ask this question for a while. It occurred to her then what a fascinating study she must make to someone who spent a lifetime honing this craft… a Dalish thief who was gifted magical boons from Gods she did not follow.

“It’s not something I’ve experienced before,” she answered carefully. ‘A version of the truth’ indeed. “But neither is the ability to manipulate rifts or kill what comes out of them. Prior to the Conclave I led a rather mundane life by comparison, Dorian. I hunted and picked pockets and sometimes had enough coin to indulge in some terrible alcohol. Every day I’ve lived since the Conclave has been increasingly unbelievable. I’ve discovered a number of new abilities, both magic and mundane. So yes, it’s new, but also not terribly surprising.”

Though it was clear he was unsatisfied with the evasiveness, he still accepted what little she was willing to impart on the subject. Crossed his arms and muttered, “That’s fair, I suppose,” with a meaningful look, as though weighing the approval required to move the conversation forward.

Behind them, stalls had begun to open up. Someone called out their wares for sale, advertising new metals. Another whistled for an apprentice to pick up the pace. While a third broke up a group of soldiers loitering nearby with no intent to purchase; late for work and taking up space that could be occupied by paying customers. It left an opening.

Dorian stood, and offered Ellana a hand up to do the same. “Number three requires a change of scenery,” he said, as he pulled her to her feet. “Before that if you’ll grant me another related question, I’m curious… Magical talent usually shows up during youth, often precipitated by a significant event. A fight, trauma, puberty — things of that nature. I’m working on the assumption that this is related to the Anchor and you had no inclination prior to the Conclave — was it the same for you? Or was this something that developed more gradually?”

As he talked he led her back into the market, and it was immediately apparent they were headed straight to the merchant he’d tried to sneak a peek at when they first passed by. The one with the colourful display of trinkets and silks.

“It was sudden, but ah… you’ll forgive me if I spare you the details of how I discovered it.”

If there’d been any question whether the implication landed, it was answered by the look he threw over one shoulder. Cheeks bright with a grin that was unabashedly delighted — and only a little aghast. “No — really?” There was no need to say it twice. He chuckled. “Don’t worry, you’re in good company. Every mage I’ve known has a similar story. I hope you didn’t leave any scars.”
“Other than my emotional ones, only the bed suffered.”

“Ha!”

Only a handful of people were still lingering in the vicinity once they reached the seller. Still, Ellana pulled the scarf up over her nose to cover most of her face; ears hid in the folds of her hood. A slim build might mark her an elf to anyone who looked twice, even with the thick clothes, but so long as she wasn’t immediately recognized as Inquisitor the disguise was enough for wandering the grounds.

Dorian gave the proprietor a nod and friendly smile as greeting, and they offered the same in return. Though the latter was assumed beneath the mask. Like most Orlesians, there was little of her visible beneath the costume. A full-skirted dress, neck ruffle, gloves and hair bonnet left her looking more like a piece of artwork than a person. Only the points of her ears set her apart from others in similar garb.

It wasn’t a feature that drew Dorian’s eye, too busy pawing through the trifles to pay much attention, but it did catch Ellana’s. There were so few elven merchants that managed to grow a business beyond their meagre origins. Often limited to selling in Dalish territories, or to their acquaintances in alienages. Trade was rife with both prejudice and favouritism; it made it almost impossible to achieve any notoriety if one wasn’t born to it. To be an Orlesian elf that made it this far marked her as particularly talented. Or lucky.

Her eyes were barely visible beneath the mask, but Ellana still saw them regard her with the same scrutiny. When she spoke, the thick accent placed her as a native of Val Royeaux. “I’ve heard the Inquisition gathers their followers from all over,” she said, “but have not had a chance to see it for myself.”

The real question was in the subtext: do they treat our kind well?

Ellana smoothed her hands down the sides of her wrap, suddenly very aware of the silhouette she cast with it. “The cause attracts all kinds, it’s true. I’ve seen Dalish Elves, casteless Dwarves, even Qunari — Tal Vashoth.”

“So diverse!” The reply seemed to genuinely delight her. “Have you served among them long?”

She never got used to speaking with Orlesians in full garb. Without the visual cues of expression or smile it always felt a bit like talking to a porcelain doll. Absently, she reached for one of the trinkets on the table — a wood carving of a bear — to keep her hands busy; distract from the urge to stare a hole through the mask.

“Less than a year,” she answered, and saw Dorian pause to give her a curious, sideways, glance. “I help where I can.”

The woman nodded. “This is my first time making the journey. Skyhold is much larger than I’d thought. And so many soldiers! The Inquisitor truly has a powerful force at her disposal. So much could be done with those numbers.”

There was a note of disapproval hidden in the words she didn’t say — Dorian was quick to comment on it. “Well,” he interjected, while he tugged on a bolt of fabric to unwind a panel for approval. Run his fingers along the edges to gauge the quality of the weave. “It’s not as though she can throw a hundred men at whatever cause she feels like. The fight against the Venatori is the most important matter at hand. Driving them out of all the places they’ve infested is a full time job all on its own, and betters the lives of those they’ve victimized.”
But the merchant ignored the interruption; her attention focused entirely on the captive audience she’d found in a fellow elf. “With so many, she could direct some to lend assistance to those left in Halamshiral’s alienage. There still lives survivors of the massacre, under constant threat of prejudice. Surely with the support of the Inquisition behind them they could be protected. Their lives bettered.”

“Yes,” Ellana agreed. Spinning the wooden toy between her fingers. “But she’s Dalish. And they’ve never held the interests of city elves in any import.”

Dorian’s eyes flicked warily between the two.

He put the bolt back down upon the table, only to have it immediately snatched up by another customer. A man in a sweat-stained shirt began measuring its length against his arm.

“I would never say so myself…” the merchant began, while she absently reached over and slipped her fingers between the folds of fabric to pull out a small price tag.

The man put that bolt down and chose another.

“…But with so much history, and elves still experiencing violence as punishment for the uprising of their fellows, I’ve heard it said that they would be better off under a Human Inquisitor instead. The gall of it!” Faux outrage she met with faux surprise. “But it is true what you say of the Dalish: they care for violence over politics, and would that not widen the divide between cities and Dales? While she chases cultists those most at risk may suffer the anger at seeing an elf — any elf — in a seat of power.”

“Of course we would never say such things,” Ellana said neutrally, but tipped her chin in agreement.

“Of course,” repeated the merchant lightly, as she did the same. “Perhaps one day, when she is done bloodying the Venatori, her eyes will cast upon the alienages where her help is most needed. Maybe if more of us gather to serve the cause, even a Dalish can be taught to heel!”

Dorian was looking exponentially more uncomfortable for each second more he had to endure listening to the conversation, so Ellana took advantage of the brief pause to pass the wood carving back — “I’ll take this,” — and pull out her coin purse for payment.

The merchant gave a little bow as she took the purse, but counted out only half the item’s worth before returning it. “For you, only ten. The pleasure of your company is enough to cover the rest.”

“Thank you,” Ellana said, then made her exit at the next opportunity. Leaving Dorian to rush through his own transaction to catch up.

Upon rejoining her, “I’ve never had the pleasure of witnessing the animosity between Dalish and city Elves—” he whispered, “—for a people spared the conflict of noble houses you manage to do a spot on impression of them.”

She gave him a look. “You think that just because we don’t own castles that we lack the ability to be complete and utter asses to each other?”

He considered that. “Is this something you do often?”

“Less, now that I lack the tattoos that mark me apart,” she replied. “We don’t run into other clans too often, and if I pass as a fellow city-born I don’t hear quite as many comments about how surprising it is that I’ve grown beyond the tenets of Dalish barbarism. Having someone go on
about it helps me see where I stand.”

“They really are itching to discuss how the Inquisitor can’t possibly understand the plight of the common folk because she’s… too common? Fascinating how even in absence of genuine aristocracy you’ll still go out of your way to create and enforce your own class system.”

“Thin ice, Dorian.”

“And here I thought you weren’t a savage.” The look she turned upon him was only part in jest, so he was moved to change the subject. Raising his hands in surrender. “Consider it dropped. Besides, I still haven’t asked my third question.”

Right. “I’d hoped the show was entertaining enough that you’d forgotten.”

He snorted. “Hardly. That was a bore by Tevinter standards — no one brandished a weapon. Additionally, this question’s the most important, so I’ve been saving it.” From under his arm he pulled out the roll of dyed fabric he’d purchased. He held it up. “What do you think?”

She turned, without slowing their pace, to give the goods the attention he clearly believed it due. It was heavy and silken, dyed a deep indigo with a gold selvage. Lovely, but a poor choice for armour — even as an accent. It would need to be twice as thick to withstand that sort of wear.

“Isn’t it a little delicate for the battlefield?”

“It’s not for me, it’s for you!” he protested, and lowered the bolt. The wounded expression he wore rode so well the line between sincerity and charade she couldn’t tell which side it fell upon until he followed with, “While I’m sure Solas would be content to wrap his child in a flour sack, that’s hardly fitting for my namesake. And as the favourite uncle I have a fundamental responsibility to ensure they’re given better.”

“They’re not even here yet and you’ve already named yourself the favourite?”

“Varric has nothing on me.”

She laughed. “Maybe your name means ‘pride’.”

“Actually it means, ‘gift’, but that’s all the more reason to ensure I give the best ones—” He stopped mid-thought. “Hm, it just occurred to me that, ‘Dorian’ is a rather poor name for a girl. What about ‘Dorina’? ‘Dorianna’?”

The disgust was so apparent on her face that no reply was needed.

“Alright, alright.” He rolled his eyes. “We can work on that one. We’re doing a thing for Wintersend later this week, yes? Food and such? Maybe sleep on it a few nights and get back to me then to see how you feel about it.”

“Absolutely not. I get precious few restful hours lately, as you already pointed out, I am not wasting a single one on, ‘Dorina’. Aside, I won’t even be there.” They approached a side door, intent to slip in by the cellar rather than through the main entry. She still owed him wine and had a pocket full of lockpicks. “Mira is attending it in my stead. I’ll have the whole night to myself.”

Dorian quickened his pace to overtake her so he’d have the opportunity to hold the door open. “Solas doesn’t care much for these things either, does he? You should take advantage of the opportunity that grants you to spend time together. Face head on a few of those things you keep running from.” He gave her a meaningful look with the suggestion, and she almost mistook for
good advice until he added, “Like fully considering my aptitude for baby names.”

Dryly, “You know,” she began, “‘Uncle Varric’ is looking better and better.”

“Spoilsport,” he accused with an exaggerated pout, and they ducked inside.

Later, when sleep was elusive, she would find herself thinking on his words while she stared at the ceiling above her bed. It was not the jokes, though they helped, as much as the counsel he offered between them. Advice he gave both in kindness, and as admonishment.

Of all the friends she’d made in the short years spent here, he was the one who best knew her failings. As well as how to lay out her mistakes in shameful display so she could not keep denying she’d made them. Cassandra was too careful, Varric too loyal, and Solas… it was different with a lover. Dorian had always been willing to say it plainly, and never pulled the punches that might smart.

There were a lot of things she was still running from.

Responsibilities, and vulnerability, and the fast-approaching start of a new challenge she still felt unqualified to face. The giddy excitement of nesting was not something she could imagine herself ever taking part in… but maybe there was some happy medium she could find between proud parent and flat denial.

It would help to have a proper night’s rest before then.

As it was, any night Solas did not guard her rest with dreamless sleep resulted in more bad dreams. Somehow it always came back to the road, and she was doomed to play it over and over. Watching from the underbrush while demons tore at the bodies of people she once cared for, until they too became monsters to torment her.

While small details might change each time — slight variations in script, the items on the road, a different cast made of those she’d loved and lost, or how quickly they succumbed — the stage was always the same.

Always cold.

Always lonely.

Always trapped.

After a while, even staying awake until dawn seemed a better alternative to risking her return night after night. She was growing weary of it. Angry, in her exhaustion, which only made it that much worse — spread terror and misery through the Fade like a wildfire that encroached upon the boundaries of all her dreams.

When the fear of the cycle became too much to grant her any rest at all, she laid in the dark for hours, trying not let her mind get lost in the spirals.

Her thoughts kept circling back to something Solas had said. A comment on the scene the first night she became lucid within it: ‘parts you’ve worked to omit’.

Things she’d written out, he meant, and replaced with monsters.
That implication needled her.

As if she’d consciously lent her hand to the creation of her own nightmares. Wielded the blades alongside time and trauma that cut her memories to ribbons and stitched them back together wrong. A patchwork of fear, fantasy, and the anguish that grew from what small truths she’d left herself.

It was tempting to dismiss it as a baseless — and near offensive — assumption. The arrogant side of him she knew too well, and the presumption that he always knew truer than she, even when speaking of her own experiences. If she brought it forward they would just run circles around that argument until they inevitably tired of the sound of their own voices.

But the more hours nights she spent considering those words the more she started to wonder. About omission, and intention, and her knack of running from things she did not wish to see.

‘There are parts you’ve worked to omit that have made the better entry points’…

Maybe what he meant wasn’t that she was the architect of her nightmares, but the crier. That the fear of facing what frightened her most had been what made the path for Fear and Terror to follow. An invitation to feast she’d laid out for their arrival. In her fervour she’d lit a signal pyre for things that prowled. Solas had spoken many times of how to guard against incursion. Taught her to resist temptation, not stray from the path, or give in to desire… but the advice was practical, not preventative. Do not listen — do not ask of them — and the demons will not come.

She’d never considered that denial might make a more effective lure than greed.

That thought began to needle her even more.

The next three nights she dreamed were spent back on that road. An unwilling participant more often than observer. Solas’ attempts to teach her how to resist the thrall never seemed to stick long enough to allow her the opportunity to let the scene play out. Each time she was drawn into the events, and lost herself. It was never a matter of ‘if’, only ‘when’. Without understanding what it was that triggered the dreams in the first place she was lost to the draw they had over her, and was swept up in the current.

Each morning she’d awaken either by Solas’ intervention, or when the dreamscape began to come apart, piecemeal, until it collapsed entirely and she was thrust violently into consciousness. The only peace awarded to her was on those nights he stayed long enough to draw her close when she woke in a shared bed. Tuck her head against his chest to hear the steady beast of his heart, and even breaths, so it might soothe her in and out of dreamless rest a few more hours.

But that wasn’t enough in the end. It wasn’t getting easier, and this cycle had played out too many times. No divine knowledge of herself or the Fade was gifted from the experience. She took nothing from it other than the understanding that it was based on her own distorted memory.

So on the fourth night she asked him to leave.

“You can wake me if you believe I am in real danger,” she’d said, to allay his fears over her going in alone. “But I do not want you there to intervene before that. Not even if you only stand aside and watch. I’ll know you’re there, somewhere, and it will change the way I think about it. I need a chance to try and understand this, so I need you to leave me be.”

Though he tried to argue a case for staying in the periphery — citing both his experience and how much more vulnerable she was in this state — ultimately he agreed to grant her the space she asked for. It was not anger or pride that fed the request, but the knowledge that she needed to seek insight
on her own. And *that* he could appreciate.

The next night she found herself there; it took all the strength she could muster not to keep her face hidden in the curl of her arms and wait for rescue. To instead rock onto all-fours and drag herself, alone and afraid, out onto the road. Leaving the safety of the underbrush in the shredded remains of a dress that trailed the ground behind her. It caught and tore each time the ratted hem slipped beneath her knees, and she felt the heavy breath of those things that sought to drive her back, but still she crawled.

Somehow she made it out of the cage of thorns where she’d buried this memory for thirty years. Long forgotten, until something breathed life back into the old fears that kept it fed.

Small and meek, with little hands and tangled hair, she followed blood-soaked trail toward the nothing and the shadow; a void she could sense, but not see. Upon reaching its boundary, she reached into the emptiness time had sown and pulled something out.

In the moment before her fingers touched upon it, she heard the voice of Compassion at her ear. Granting her the final burst of courage she’d need to follow through.

“The will hurt — it haunts, heavy, and pulls in places you didn’t know — but you will be better in the end.”

Solas found her the night after.

A few hours into the Wintersend dinner she didn’t attend. It was a small, but well-stocked event the ‘Inquisitor’ hosted in the main hall. Labourers and merchants and soldiers came together for a night of fine food, music, and wine to lift spirits after the dreary winter season had begun to pass. The double mingled with the crowd — laughed and celebrated — while the real Inquisitor waited in her room for an opportunity to join Solas in his.

The appointment was set before she’d asked him to give her a few nights alone, and in the absence of any word to the contrary he waited all evening for a knock on his door that never came. As the hour approached midnight and the festivities were only just winding down, he resolved to join her in the Fade rather than risk being seen slipping through a crowd of party-goers.

Asleep, it took no time at all to find her. She was a beacon in the Dreaming even when her rest was peaceful — the Anchor lit the way. She sat on a hill overlooking the road — this time alone. It was dusk, as it often was, and the scene bathed in same warm light and the scent of fallen leaves it always had been. She sat in pensive silence watching the sun set. There were no demons or monsters this time; no other figures. She was in her own clothes, in her own form, with her arms wrapped loosely around raised knees.

The dreamscape was so still that she could sense his approach before she saw him. If he did not soften them, his steps rippled in the ambience like pebbles dropped in water. Her eyes flicked briefly in his direction.

He cut in with an apology before she had a chance to greet him. “I’m sorry, I know you had asked not to be disturbed… but when you did not come by this evening I wanted to make sure you were alright.” The question was implied, but instead of an answer she offered only silence in return. It was neither cold nor angry, just contemplative, and so he did not worry he’d intruded upon it.
A moment later he prompted her again: “May I join you?”

This time she looked at him fully, and offered both soft smile and gentle nod. Waiting until he’d sat down next to her before turning her attention back to the road. The sun was disappearing beyond the canopy of trees now; almost set.

“Apparently Mira got so drunk Josephine had to drag her out of the party early. Bring her to the clinic,” she said, apropos of nothing. “She was given some restoratives, but they’ll do little to sober her up of course. She might end up spending the night there if she cannot be discreetly moved to her room later. Josephine came up briefly to tell me, before I went to sleep. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen her well and truly angry — I’m not sure I ever will — but I think this was the closest she’s come in all the time I’ve known her.”

Solas smiled. “I’ve had the fortune to see her upset only once.” And he held up a finger. “Fortune, because I was not the focus of her anger at the time. When she is very cross, she pauses between each word — as if each were its own sentence. Likely to be mindful of her tone but the effect is quite daunting.”

Ellana laughed. “Based on the brief description I received, I doubt Mira will recall enough of the experience to be intimidated by it. Even when she could barely stand she was still claiming to have only imbibed a glass or two, all evidence to the contrary.”

There was a pause while Solas considered. Then, “You do not begrudge her the behaviour?”

“We’ve all done something irresponsible when given the freedom too,” she replied. And rest a hand upon the swell of her middle — perhaps unconsciously. “The time she’s at this post will be the most freedom she’s ever enjoyed in her life, and it will pay well enough that she can make whatever she wants of it after that. If it were me, I might do the same.”

Another pause. “Do you miss it?”

She glanced at him. “Being drunk?”

“That, and the gatherings. Time spent among people. Though you have often lamented the parties and dinners, it would not be so unusual to feel excluded from them now. To mourn the loss, even if it is only temporary. Your absence is not by choice, which can frame it somewhat differently.”

“I… suppose I do,” Ellana said haltingly. The answer surprised her. “The time I’ve spent as the Inquisitor has been so short in the grand scheme of things, but the significance of the role has been so large that it’s harder than I’ve expected to step back. Allow someone else to do it for me. If she takes my place… I suppose a part of me worries she might somehow keep it.”

“A double is hardly unusual,” he noted with a meaningful look. “All nobility employs them, and though their duties vary they hardly qualify to take over. Her tasks are menial, and approved by you and your advisors — she is not your replacement.”

“Am I nobility now?” she countered. But her tone was light, and the raised eyebrow showed she took no offence.

The little curl of his lips could not quite be called a smile. “To some, I’m certain. You are Andruste’s Herald in addition to being the Inquisitor; many see that as sacrosanct. A higher honour than a leader.”

She chuckled. “Even a year ago I would have been happy to hand the reigns to another… but today?” A sigh was only slightly exaggerated. A little theatre to illustrate the point. “To think I’ve
come to enjoy the status as another false god — though I feel that alone should trouble me.”

“Heavy wears the crown.”

In the pause that followed after, he tentatively brushed a hair behind her ear. Indulging in running his fingers along the shell, to the pointed tip, and watching how it drew a small smile. In the Fade every touch was heightened — every emotion deepened. Simple affections like fingers wove together, hands held, or a kiss, were intensified by its very nature. She could sense his desire to embrace her as if it were her own. And the restraint he showed out of respect for the setting.

Instead of holding her, he said, “You have gained significant control since last I saw you. I was not sure you’d be able to accomplish it at all, let alone so quickly.”

Her voice was far away when she replied; somewhere off with her gaze, watching the horizon. So distant, at first, that it was almost as though she was not speaking to him at all. He just happened to be listening to her talk.

“It bothered me — that there were these things missing each time I was here long enough to see something. I knew what was gone, I’m not an idiot, but it felt so deliberate. I was stuck on that, and what you’d said of it that first night I saw you here too. But it was more than just wanting it to feel complete — I wanted to know why. Why do I keep coming back here? Why now? I’ve dreamed about this place before, in pieces, in ways I didn’t understand — howling wolves and going hungry — but it has felt very different since I’ve been pregnant.

“I know this story, I’d been told a version of it, but it’s never meant that much to me.” She winced, and gave him a guilty sideways glance. “That must sound rather cold…” But he touched her hand, a small reassuring gesture, and she continued. “Is it simply a matter of thinking more on my roots now that I’m sowing my own? I’ll admit I’ve thought about my family more in the last six months than I have in the last twenty years — but it’s felt like more than just that. This same nightmare, tearing me down until demons found a way in wearing the skin of my memories… like I was being brow-beat with it, over and over.

“Then, a few days back, I was sitting in bed reading and the baby was in such a spin. It’s like there’s a whole litter of puppies in there sometimes. It was terribly uncomfortable, and I said aloud, ‘you have far too many elbows.’” It took steady breaths to keep the emotion out of her voice now, with the threat of tears pricking. “It’s just a stupid phrase — I can’t even remember where I knew it from — and maybe it’s because I’ve never said it aloud before, but it struck a different chord when I heard it in my voice. And then all these little pieces started to fall into place, and I thought maybe I knew how to loosen this chokehold: I needed that answer — the why.

“Once I came here with that purpose, as long as I could resist the current, the rest started to make sense.”

She turned her eyes back to the road, and found it once more littered with debris. Bags of grain, pieces of wood, all the things they’d seen before.

The light had changed.

The warmth that filtered through the trees when Solas first arrived had cooled to a dull grey, though whether that was caused by a change in hour or merely the weight her emotion lent was impossible to say.

“Do you wish me to stay?” he asked, when it was clear the events might replay differently this time.
Her answer was in the tight grip of her fingers around his own, and the way her thumb rubbed a circle upon his skin. Searching for safe harbour in a soft touch; he was an anchor.

Before them, the boy and the man flitted in and out of the scene like ghosts. Bending and bowing as they played their parts. Investigating a ruined bag, broken cart, the marks in the dirt, and the bodies on the road. But there were changes: a man with blank face and a cut throat leaned against a tree — three arrows in his chest. More in his back. He wore no armour, and carried no weapon.

Not far lay the body of another face-down in the mud. Her arms outstretched, as though she’d been crawling on hands and knees, to the last breath, trying to reach the other side of the road. Dark, tangled, hair was caked with muck and leaves, obscuring her face if she had one.

The boy crouched nearby and with the point of his knife gently swept a wet mat of curls off her cheek to expose a pointed ear. “You were right, hahren,” he said. “Elf”.

Solemnly, quietly, “I didn’t call out to them,” Ellana said. “Even after they found me I don’t think I said a word for weeks, maybe longer. He’d told me not to make a sound — so I didn’t.

“I was so cold and weak I could barely move, let alone walk. Taren carried me back to the clan wrapped up in one of the blankets they’d found. I must have fallen asleep on him almost immediately. I’d been awake for days. Everything after is just flashes for a while. Getting scrubbed raw in the river, and my hair combed into braids. Eating flatcakes until I was sick with them. Lying curled up against Deshanna’s back, while she slept, with my hand on her back to feel her breathe. But… once I remembered my mother in the road — really remembered her — I realized where I’d heard those words before. ‘Too many elbows’, and what Taren said in the garden.”

The next breath shook. “It was never about me.”

In smoke and spirit the figure of Taren — tall and willow-strong — retrieved a child from a thorn bush and wrapped them in a stained blanket. Knotting it tight around his shoulder. Battered feet dangling bare from the makeshift sling, a bundle he held tight to his chest. As he walked, he was careful to turn their face away from the wreckage behind them. Tuck it against his neck instead, and whisper promises of food and warmth to soothe her gnawing hunger.

“…There are other children there; families who live together. You will be safe. We’ll get you food and a bed.”

Behind him Darvas lingered by the body of the woman. He crouched, and lay a hand upon her shoulder. Closed his eyes in a moment of silent prayer. But flinched when he opened them, as if startled — or noticing something he hadn’t before. A moment was spent considering, before he very carefully pushed against the body. Bracing his hand by an arrow lodged deep in her side. He rolled her up just far enough to see what lay beneath.

These wisps of memory, without the power lent to them by demons making weapons of their sting, were less complete. Less intricate. The details of expression were lost to time.

It was not necessary to see them to know that the fall of his shoulders was in deep sorrow.

“Hahren,” he said. Softer this time, so not to draw the attention of the little rescue with their ears tucked in the sling.

Taren paused and turned around.

He saw, and his face fell too.
Gently, he placed a hand on the back of the child’s head to keep her still against him. Lest she try to see. Spare her a final, cruel, vision of what violence had stolen.

The scene began to blow away, fading as she’d fallen asleep, but their voices remained on the wind a moment more.

“That’s unfortunate,” said Taren’s. “They could not even spare the unborn. Falon’Din guide both their souls.”

And then they were gone.

A heavy silence hung over the scene, after. And for several moments neither Solas nor Ellana deigned to break it.

They watched together as the last light of the setting sun disappeared below the horizon. With it went scuffs on the dirt, the debris, and broken things. Until it was once more just a place. Somewhere between others — as plain as any other stretch of road.

There were no words that could convey the depth of comfort needed, not the way he wished to, so Solas said nothing.

The moon had nearly risen when Ellana spoke again.

“Once that came back, a few other things did too,” she said softly. And did not hide the hitch in her voice now, nor the tears on her cheeks. The air felt thick — it hurt to breathe it. “I remember a little home dug into a hill. There was a chimney in the top, with little bricks they made of clay, and when the fire was lit everything smelled like cedar. And I remember that we were headed South, because there would be game, and she said she could not walk as fast as we did. So we should go easy on her. We were so hungry.

“When I was alone, and believed I would die, I thought maybe if she wasn’t…” The lump in her throat stole the rest, so it was left unspoken. “…then maybe she would have been faster. Would have run further. It might not have happened. Maybe if she’d spent money on grain instead of a gift for me it would have delayed our leave another week. By the end I had concocted so many reasons why, when really none of it mattered at all. It was just senseless.”

She turned to him then, and saw the ache in her chest reflected in his eyes when he looked at her. A grief he felt not for their loss, but in sympathy of her own. It had always been easier in the Fade. His thoughts writ so plainly on his face, here; his heart open.

“I still cannot remember their faces. Their names. I don’t know that there is anyone left alive who would. I’ve hung a hope on the idea that maybe one day I can find this place—” she gestured toward the road. “—if I’m lucky, perhaps some spirit still keeps the memories of their last hours.”

Softly, “It’s possible,” he replied. Though she knew the chance was much smaller than he’d admit. It still soothed her to hear the lie.

“Maybe one day I could even find the place we came from,” she whispered. And then laughed, in spite of herself, as she wiped her eyes. “What is it worth having all this power and influence if I cannot use it to find the answers I truly want?”

“Even a God cannot gain all the boons they seek.”

This smile felt a little more genuine. “Perhaps I should pray for divine intervention.”
He returned it. And, “Perhaps,” he allowed. “Should we ever be awarded the chance to try and look, it is a cause I would wish to lend my skill to.”

Her arms were bare, and so beginning to prickle with the chill of night as it fell. She hugged herself and rubbed warmth into her skin. His eyes followed the movement. “I wouldn’t even know where to start. I suppose I could start by writing Deshanna… asking where clan Lavellan was settled at the time I was brought in. Wherever it was, was within a day’s walk of where this happened. It might narrow it down, at least.”

But rather than reply, he gently touched her arm, and just as it had once before the world seemed to narrow around him. Until all she could see and hear was his mouth as he spoke.

He said, “I will find you upon your return.”

She frowned, confused. “What?” But he was already gone.

She opened her eyes.

Something had awoken her.

It was still dark.

Colder than it should have been.

For a moment she wondered if her perception of what had happened had been all wrong. Somehow she’d still been caught in the Nightmare’s thrall and had changed nothing… but then the flutter of the curtains caught her eye and she saw the balcony door left slightly ajar. The room had gone cold from the draft. She’d neglected to light the fire before bed, as she’d originally intended not to spend the night here. If she didn’t want to keep waking from the chill she’d have to get up and start one.

However, it was just as tempting to burrow deeper into the blankets and go back to sleep, content in the knowledge that the dreams no longer had the same thrall over her as before. Solas was there too, waiting on her return to the Fade. So she stayed, instead.

There was a shimmer in the far corner of her room, near the doors, as though the moonlight briefly caught on something shining. Like a goblet or glass vial. But when her eyes flicked toward it she saw nothing there. Just her writing desk full of books and parchment, unfinished work, and the flutter of the curtain sheers. The wind picked up the edges of a stack of paper, held down by the weight of a crystal Dorian was working on enchanting — they waved in the breeze. Surely, what she’d seen.

Though she tried to dismiss it, her gaze kept coming back to where the bottom edge of the curtain brushed against the desk’s leg. Something about it seemed… curious. Off. It pulled her in like the nothing in her dreams: not because something was there, but because something wasn’t. It was a void that felt deliberate.

Her skin prickled, not just from the cold.

Something was wrong.

She had the chilling sensation she was being watched.

Only once her pulse kicked up and her senses heighten with it did she finally notice what had set her off: the curtain’s edge was not touching the table at all. The draft gave the sheers enough lift that it should have skimmed across the side. Instead, it rest against something tangible, but
invisible. Whatever it was currently stood between the door and desk.

“Cole?” she tested.

Something shifted, and there was another shimmer.

In that moment it occurred to her that while she often left the balcony doors closed through early spring, she never locked them.

And they’d been shut when she fell asleep that night.

Her hand shot out toward the drawer on her bedside table, where a dagger was stowed, but in her blind haste she aimed too high and hit an empty teacup instead. It fell, then shattered on the floor the same instant a throwing knife landed deep in her shoulder. The crash masking her cry of pain. The wielder, now visible, stood between the desk and the balcony door wearing dark leathers and a scarf covering the lower half of their face. They had been aiming for where her neck had been just a second before.
Time seemed to slow.

With her senses sharpened by pain and adrenaline, Ellana could see the map of her tower room laid out like any other battlefield — cover, corners and improvised weapons. In an instant she had a list of tactics; where to go and what to use. Dodge and weave. How to get the upper hand on an attacker that had managed to surprise her.

All strategies that would fail.

When her body caught up and she began to move it became terribly, absolutely, apparent that she was going to be too slow to rely on any of her usual tactics.

There would be too much weight thrown into a step, or her dexterity hampered by the way she rolled her body in stages. Even just by bolting upright to grab at the wound the knife made, she was betraying herself. Breathless and heavy. Every move she made telegraphed her intent to her enemy.

Combat with her centre of gravity so changed was an entirely different experience. She’d trained since she’d become pregnant, but not enough. Nowhere near enough. Too much time was wasted with practice dummies and poses instead of sparring and it had left her soft.

Soft, slow, with no armour, no weapons, and no time to get them without leaving herself vulnerable.

If she didn’t find an advantage to leverage she would lose this fight. And if her attacker managed to flank her, she’d be dead even sooner.

*Think faster,* she bid herself, *small steps. Prioritize.*

First, she needed to get the knife out of her shoulder and staunch the bleeding.

Next, she needed to mark her attacker so they could not disappear into the shadows again.

She had only a second to size up the assassin. They’d revealed themselves when they threw the knife, standing by the balcony doors left slightly ajar. The main door to her room was still closed; she could hear it by the way the shattered cup echoed when it struck the floor. That meant they’d come in from outside. Almost certainly by scaling the outer wall. There was a good chance they were acting alone. If another came with them, they’d not made it onto the balcony yet.

The attacker was about her height, thinly built, wearing simple armour made of dark leathers optimized for movement. Good for stealth and speed — poor for protection. She counted three weapons: one currently in her shoulder, and another two knives sheathed on their belt. Probably a
spare in their boot if they were smart, but no staff or bow. Unusual for Venatori. She wasn’t as
good at deflecting thrown weapons but she had enough practice to know the tricks. She’d have to
be fast or find a good shield.

Gratefully she was granted the time to, as they’d hesitated a moment after they struck. Not because
they missed their target, but because the throw had been reflexive: triggered when she called out.
They’d not expected her to be awake. It left an opening.

Ellana wrapped her hand around the knife’s handle and grit her teeth. In one swift movement she
tore it out of her shoulder and flung it back at the assailant. Painting a spray of blood on the duvet
as it spun. It was a calculated risk: she was betting if they’d thought to kill her by quick and silent
coup de grâce they weren’t prepared for a real fight.

They dodged, but not fast enough, and the knife skimmed an arm as they reached for their second
weapon. While the thrown one struck deep in the bookshelf behind them, the other was dropped to
the floor. Blood dripped from the cut.

*Marked.*

That flinch granted her another opportunity and she seized it by rolling sideways out of bed and
onto the floor, knocking the bedside table down with her to act as a barrier. If she had any chance
of turning this around it would be in utilizing the room itself. The one advantage she had: familiar
terrain.

The attacker was already off and running by the time she’d positioned herself behind it, veering
wide rather than charging in. Looking for cover. With two out of three knives left behind — one in
the shelf, another on the floor — they were already low on options. As much in need of time to
strategize as she was. She lost sight of them when they stopped hard on the runner rug, slid it over
the stone floor, and landed somewhere near the wardrobe.

Ellana grabbed for her own dagger — enchanted with fire and warm to touch — from out the
upturned bedside table, then crawled on hands and knees around the side of the bed. At the corner
she darted her head out, just for a second, to scan the room.

Nothing.

Either they were in full cover behind the furniture or they’d managed to disappear again.

*“Shit,”* she whispered.

The bleeding in her shoulder was becoming a problem. Now soaked through her nightdress, it ran
down her arm and onto the floor. Pooling in the red-streaked handprints she left behind on the tiles
as she crawled.

She risked another glance around the room: still nothing. No movement, no shimmering, and no
shadows. If she could get around the other side of the bed she could run for the side room, with the
ladder, and climb into the loft. Gain the higher ground. But she’d be dangerously exposed before
she made it, and with no eye on the attacker it was too big a risk. She’d have to lure them out first.

*Priorities.*

The shoulder wound stung — a sharp reminder.

She flipped the knife around and held the burning blade against her wound, cauterizing it. The
smell of scalded flesh made her stomach turn; but worse, the pain drew a cry she failed to stifle. It
was immediately followed by the sound of footsteps running in her direction.

She counted them: one, two, three, four — crossing the room — then a leap. The momentum carried them over the bed, and if well-planned would land them on the other side on top of her. If the last knife was in hand she’d be done in by that blow no matter where it struck.

*Dodge and weave.*

Ellana timed a roll for the instant before they appeared in the air. It worked — another miss. Instead of her, the knife hit the stone with enough force to crack it, and Ellana followed the assassin’s missed strike with a sure one. Plunging her fire-hot blade into the back of their leg.

They roared.

*She* roared.

It was a woman — unmistakable — though whatever curse she’d invoked in her fury was also lost to it. That was followed by a scream of pain as the wound instantly seared closed. If she was lucky she’d hit well enough to hamstring her. A messy, but effective tactic — it would slow her down. But the assassin was too quick to recover, spinning on her knees to counter the attack with a sharp jab, and she knew she’d missed her chance.

An iron-studded fist came flying at Ellana’s nose. She dodged. The swing went wide. There was enough power thrown into it that the woman spun, and was forced to catch herself on the floor as she twisted round.

*Poorly trained for Venatori* — she wasn’t nearly as elegant as her brethren. Young, brash, or both.

In the time it took her to right herself Ellana managed to leap to her feet, clasp her hands together, and come down hard on the back of the woman’s neck with joined fists. The blow took her down, though not out, and she crumpled to the floor. Stunned just long enough for Ellana to grab the last knife from her loosened fist and fling it toward the staircase to get rid of it. After, she took off running around the bed. Passing by the desk to swipe a heavy candelabra off its top.

The door to the side room flew open when she heaved a shoulder against it — no time to bother with the latch — and she quickly spun, kicked it shut behind her, then jumped onto the ladder. With her pace slowed by the weapon she only made it half-way up before her attacker caught up and grabbed her by the ankles. Ellana wrapped one arm around a rung to anchor herself, and with the other smashed the candlestick holder against the woman’s head. It hit hard enough to send her flying sideways, against the wall, leaving a streak of blood behind as she slid to the floor.

Ellana did not stay long enough to see if the blow succeeded in knocking her out. Having her legs freed was enough.

She made it to the top in two quick upward leaps and ran for the corner of the loft, finding cover behind a stack of wooden beams stored for repairs. The candelabra gripped tight in her hands. By the time she turned around to glance back at the ladder, the woman was already climbing off of it.

“Pissing hell,” Ellana swore, quietly, “what are you *made of*?” And she ducked behind the stack of wood. Bracing herself for another round of blows.

Through a gap in the beams she had eyes on her approach, barely a shadow against the moonlight filtering in through the curtain sheers. As she moved her body listed to one side, just a little. Her gait uneven. A half-step, a stumble, too heavy on her right foot. The attacks hadn’t been for nothing — she was showing *some* wear.
When she was just a few paces away Ellana leaped. Loosed a warrior’s cry and swung the candelabra with both arms. She hit her square in the chest. The assassin reeled backward, tripped over her feet, and went down. Landing hard on her back. There was a crunch of glass on impact, then the strong, earthy, scent of shattered tonics.

Ellana whispered a prayer of thanks for the favour. With the vials destroyed it meant she couldn’t grab a second dose of whatever it was that had kept her going. This stamina could not possibly be unaided, and any tonic she’d taken would be wearing off soon.

It had to be wearing off soon.

But just in case it didn’t she dared not waste a second on hope. Dropping the candlestick, she tackled her before she could get back up. Pinned her arms to the floor by dropping her knees on top of them. Then made to stab her again with the enchanted dagger, this time in the chest, but didn’t get the chance before she broke free and rolled them both. For such a scrawny thing she was uncommonly strong, and managed to flip Ellana onto her back with barely any effort. A thin stiletto already grasped in a hand, raised, and aimed at her throat.

Shit — she’d been right about a hidden weapon.

Ellana wrapped both hands around her attacker’s wrist. Fighting back with all she had as the knife’s needle tip hovered perilously above her neck. In a contest of strength Ellana would lose, she knew this. Felt it in the quiver that started in her arms and worked its way down into her chest as they fought for inches. Any move she dared would just cede ground to her attacker, and then it would only take a single surge of strength to finish the job. She’d not last much longer.

*I will not fucking die to a glory-seeker after all I’ve gone through.*

She grit her teeth, and prayed for time.

But in the end it wasn’t her fight that saved her… it was her position.

Seated on Ellana’s hips while she held her down, the assassin finally got the opportunity to take a closer look at her target. To notice what she’d failed to when this began. The mask covering her face had come loose in the struggle, now hanging off her collar, revealing a mean frown and clenched teeth that slowly slackened as her gaze flicked from the Inquisitor’s face, downward, then back again.

And for just a second her resolve wavered.

“You’re…”

An opening.

Ellana grunted, “Your information is out of date!” and scrabbled for her dropped knife. When her fingers closed around the hilt she roared — and jammed it deep between two ribs.

The woman crumpled and dropped her weapon — but kept her knees locked. The ferocity with which she fought burned only hotter for every blow taken, but the injuries were starting to slow her down. Desperation would make her sloppy.

Ellana pulled back the bloodied dagger for another strike, but it never landed. In one hand the woman pinned her arm to the floor at the wrist, causing her to drop the weapon, while with the other she gripped Ellana’s throat tight.
Squeezed.

In a familiar accent, “No matter,” she said, and grit her teeth.

Orlesian?

Not Venatori, then.

Blood dripped from one corner of her mouth, and when she turned her head to spit it upon the floor the tip of a pointed ear was visible beneath her hair. Elf — she should have known it by her eyes shining in the dark, but had been too occupied trying to stay one step ahead of the battle to take notice.

The assassin coughed. Wheezed. Breath barely more than whistling and shiver as it left her lungs. A death rattle: she knew it too. It was written on her face in solemn determination but bloodlust would push her to the last heartbeat. The grip on Ellana’s throat tightened.

“Are you so leashed that you even serve the humans in their beds like a common whore? Do they call for you when they leave their women at home?” Disgust and rage dripped from every word. Ellana clawed uselessly at the stranglehold, her nails tearing on the silver studs that lined the back of her leather gloves. “Another bastard born of men who lie with dogs. I will spare them a regrettable existence, born to a savage and her slavers.”

Fuck — the merchant.

It was the way she spit the word ‘savage’ that made her. She’d heard that voice before.

Fucking politics. Fucking prejudice. Fucking territory wars in places she had no authority to change. Yet for their stagnation was blamed regardless, by virtue of their shared blood. Being the first of her kind to rise to power bore her fewer favours than enemies.

Ellana choked, “You really think another in my place would care more for the plight of our people?” remembering her words in the market days ago.

“Our people? You are their bitch — not my people,” she spat in return. “A false idol growing fat on the scraps they throw you. While you bask in gold and fineries, elves burn in alienages. Are punished for crimes they did not commit. Or are bought and sold like chattel. Were you honourable you would intervene but instead you dance for them. A novelty. A plaything. What do you even care of the plight to your own people? Do you know how they suffer, Lavellan? What conspiracies are invented to build a pyre for your brothers and sisters?”

That wasn’t right. She’d received a letter not a year back. They were fine.

Weren’t they?

“So quick to turn your back — now you lie on it instead. You offer nothing but false hope, and when they’re done amusing themselves with you they’ll throw you away like all their other whores and we’ll have nothing to show for it.”

It was getting harder to think. She was running out of air — and when she spoke it was barely above a whisper. “There won’t be alienages, there won’t even be cities if you kill me.” Darkness began to creep into the periphery of her vision, and sound dull to a high-pitched whine. “The scope of Corypheus’ power is greater than you know!”

“All the more reason a pawn should not be tasked to fight him.” She gave a humourless chuckle,
and flashed a blood-stained smile. “Release us from this empty promise and greet your end. What is it your people say? ‘Dread Wolf take you’?”

It was the last thing she heard before everything went black.

She could feel her pulse slowing.

Blind, deaf, and fading, Ellana drew on the one trick she had left. In the dark she scrabbled for her target, all claws and clumsy swings, struggling to stay alive long enough to find something. When her fingers brushed across the sharp edge of the woman’s jaw she dug her nails in. Felt the skin break and bleed beneath them. Then with all the life she had left within her — and a memory of Corypheus at Haven in the forefront of her mind — she reached for a force she’d pulled from the Veil only twice before.

_Burn!_

At first it wasn’t clear if the gambit had succeeded. She could not even be sure that she was still alive. Floating, uncertain, in the limbo between consciousness and death and struggling to find enough air to take a single breath.

There was a rushing feeling that travelled from her chest, up her arm, culminating in… _something._

Then she felt flesh melting in her hand.

Smelled the char. Hair and leather burning — like her body had at camp. Tasted bile and blood in her throat as the grip upon it started to loosen. She gasped.

There was no heat, yet she felt the flames. In her palm. Between her fingers. Power drawn from the scars borne upon her skin by her own inexperience. _Incompetence._ Reforged into a weapon that could tear through another’s.

This would not be a show of sparks — it would be hellfire.

Sound returned before sight, and so the first thing she heard was the screams. Then the gurgling as what was left of the woman’s throat turned to liquid; and finally, ash.

There was an explosion so blinding the scene was seared upon the backs of her eyelids in painful detail. The shadow of her attacker looming over her surrounded by a brilliant halo of light brighter than the sun.

But when she could open her eyes, blinking clear the spots and stars, she saw only flame.

In her desperation she’d called upon the Anchor’s power, and with it ripped a tear in the Veil from which she pulled a river of mana. Gathering, coiling, and finally casting it out in the form of a fireball so large it consumed not just her enemy but the entire room beyond her.

Before her was a hole in the world, and a towering inferno — a testament to the power of her unbridled fury.

Fire bloomed upon the wall as if grown from it. Racing up the wooden supports and onto the ceiling. Raining burning debris down as it spread. Sparks caught an old tapestry that had been stored with an edge hanging over the loft’s railing, and from there the fire jumped onto the bed’s canopy. Then the shades tied to the posts. Half the room had gone up in seconds.

What was left of her attacker was quickly disappearing under a column of flame. Flesh blackened
and face twisted in the same haunting expression of agony worn by the victims of the Conclave’s explosion. With the ripple of green hanging above her it was hard not to draw the comparison. Little was left of her beyond the remains of leather armour, cracked and curled, and the metal buttons worn on the clothes beneath. A hard shove unseated the corpse from her hips, where it landed near the ladder and exploded into sparks.

Freed, Ellana aimed a hand at the tear and called again upon the Anchor’s power to close it. Sealing it shut before demons of Rage and Terror could come through and take form of her anger.

Somehow she had been left unscathed by the blaze — but not for long. Falling embers caught upon the hem of her nightdress, scorching holes in the thin fabric and spreading fast. She tried to smother it with her hands but burned herself in the process. Then scrambled backward, clumsy on hands and feet, as if she could escape her clothes on fire by outrunning them. In her panic she’d forgotten every lesson taught to her of channelling, buffers, and energy. Not that they’d have saved her now: this was well beyond the ability of one mage to control.

As the blaze stretched along wood beams, curtains, and hangings on the walls, she resorted to throwing out a singed palm and making demands of it. Summoning ice, and water, and thoughts of runed staves in snowy glens. Dorian’s guidance. Practicing until her feet went numb from cold.

Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it!

It wasn’t working.

So instead she stared at the raging fire, paralyzed by fear, and thought of her friends asleep in their beds. Of how long it might take for the blaze to reach them.

The sound of pounding on the door tore her from the stupor.

Metal on wood.

Guards?

Someone called out, though she could not hear what was said. Too far, but their voice sounded urgent. The fight had caused enough commotion to draw the attention of a patrol. Or maybe someone passing by had smelled the smoke and come for her.

She tried to scream — “Fire!” — but it came out a hoarse whisper. Smoke, shock, and the injuries suffered by being choked half to death had stolen her voice. Instead she stood — unsteady on shaking legs — and took a running leap over the railing. No time to be careful. It was not a graceful landing, and was punctuated by a spike of pain shot through her leg — her ankle twisted. A second later the door to her room burst open, and two sets of heavy, pounding, footsteps followed up the stairs.

An armoured guard came into view. “Inquisitor!” she cried. Hand out to help her, before her eyes drifted to the loft. Then to the bed, in flames. For a moment she stood frozen and horror-struck, the offered hand slowly falling, as the gravity of the scene sank in.

Ellana stood, shifting her weight to the uninjured leg, but swayed for the effort. The adrenaline was wearing off and exhaustion setting in. She was bleeding both from the re-opened shoulder wound as well as several smaller cuts on her neck, hands, and legs. Injuries she hadn’t noticed receiving during the scuffle.

“Get help,” she ordered. The woman’s eyes snapped back to hers. “I was attacked. They’re dead, but we need to get the fire under control.”
The guard nodded. Behind her, the second reached the landing. A young man, too new to have seen much in the line of duty, for he wore his fear plainly on his face. Lost in the majesty of the fire, slack-jawed and wide-eyed, he had yet to even notice the Inquisitor stood among them.

Belatedly, and in the same instant as the first guard, Ellana realized a swath of her gown was burnt away from knees to middle. She was nude beneath, but modesty hardly seemed important before the damning curve of her silhouette.

There was a look of blatant surprise. Then steeled determination. The guard acted quickly: stepping between her partner and the Inquisitor to block his view of her once he tore his eyes from the inferno. She barked an order, “Go grab a sheet from the hall — now! Quickly!”

He startled, a little dazed, but did as he was told. Immediately disappearing back down the steps and out the door.

The guard spun back and extended a hand. “Come with me, Herald. I need to take you to the clinic.”

Ellana took the assist, but nixed the suggestion. “No — I need to speak to Leliana immediately.”

“You’re injured. At least—”

She cut the air with a sharp gesture. “I’ll be fine for now. Get Leliana”.

Behind her the canopy over the bed collapsed, and a spray of sparks erupted onto the floor. Skittering in all directions. The fire had spread to the wardrobe, travelling along the carpet toward the desk full of tonics, notes and letters. All her work.

Ellana swore, and made a run for it, but the guard stopped her with a tight grip on her arm. Yelled, “You cannot stay here,” to be heard above the blaze. “The wall may come down if the supports burn away. It’s not safe!”

She started to protest, “I need—” but lost the rest to a coughing fit. The room was rapidly filling with smoke. Visibility had become so poor there was no longer even a clear path to the desk.

It was gone already.

“Fenedhis, alright, let’s go.”

The young man reappeared at the door, and the female guard was quick to intercept him before he made it back up the stairs. “Here!” She beckoned with her free hand, and he tossed the sheet up. A moth-eaten dust cover for an unfinished project on the stair, but it would do fine. She caught it easily, turned, and flung it around Ellana’s shoulders to style it like a long cloak. Held shut in the front to cover her. Though her steeled expression betrayed nothing there was care in her hands as she tugged it into place: this was to preserve her privacy more than her modesty.

To the younger guard she shouted, “Go fetch Madam de Fer if she isn’t on her way already. We need mages to control the blaze!”

“Yes, ser!”

He ran, and they were right on his heels this time. Down the stairs two at a time while the guard held a raised shield over Ellana’s head to protect her from falling debris. A loud crash echoed behind them just as they made it into the great hall; stone and wood coming down. Part of the tower ceiling had collapsed. A moment more and she would have been crushed beneath it.
The Wintersend dinner had ended hours earlier but the hall was still set for feast. Bowls, goblets, and platters full of bones picked clean littered the tables. Staff was still working to clear it all. The enduring scent of wine and meat permeated the room, now mingling with the smoke billowing in from the stair. A few people had lingered since the celebration: one or two passed out with their heads down on a table, the others — drunk — on their feet wearing matching expressions of concern as they gathered in the middle of the room. More were coming in from side doors. From outside. Vivienne was among them, flanked by the young man tasked with finding her.

“Inquisitor!” she cried, picking up her skirts as she ran. She was dressed in bedclothes, but arrived too quick to have been roused from sleep. “What’s—?”

“I will brief everyone when I can,” Ellana cut over her. “But right now the priority is the tower fire. I need you to help get it under control.”

Vivienne nodded tersely. “Of course,” she said. Once abreast of the Inquisitor she laid a firm hand upon her arm and pressed a curative spell into the skin. Mending the scatter of light cuts and burns back together. Her eyes made a quick pass over the rest of her and, once satisfied there were no major injuries she could see, added, “The Undercroft,” as she jogged toward the stairs. “It’s empty this time of night, and out of harm’s way should the fire spread. Go there to await others.”

“Right.”

Taking the cue, the guard escorting her led Ellana toward it. Behind them the crowd continued to grow, drawn by the commotion. Talking of explosions and fire. Sabotage or Venatori. Some had smelled the smoke and come running, others had gone to awaken their comrades, fearing a larger attack. Some were crying; survivors of Haven that had seen something like this once before. Frantic questions and exclamations of surprise spread through the room in a wave of whispers.

No one noticed the pair disappear into the Undercroft.

“I will have them disperse,” offered the guard as they entered. In lieu of a chair, she had Ellana take a seat on the stone banister at the top of the stairs, by a lit brazier. Then rearranged the sheet around her to ensure the cover stayed in place. “Are you sure you would not like me to bring the medic?”

Ellana waved a hand dismissively. “It looks worse than it is — I’ll be fine. I just need to speak with my advisors.”

“What of the others? Should they come looking, I can have my patrol reassure them of your safety and direct them elsewhere… unless you are comfortable granting them an audience?”

It was a careful question.

“They know.”

A nod. “By your order, Inquisitor.”

But before she could leave, “Wait—” Ellana called. She turned back with her hand on the door. “What’s your name? I’m sorry, I don’t know it.” Much of the night shift were strangers to her; in their time at Skyhold she’d only come to recognize a few dozen, at best. Guards who patrolled during peak hours, and a few that manned specific stations like the front gate or the hall’s entrance.

“Alice, your worship.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Alice.”
Another nod, and she left.

As it happened no one needed to fetch Leliana, she was already on her way. The door hadn’t even been closed ten heartbeats before it opened again to admit her. Eyes dark with quiet fury — she was storming. Unaccompanied for now but with a promise that more were coming.

Before Ellana could say a word, “I’ve sent word to Cullen and Josephine that you’ve been moved to safety,” she reported. “He already has troops combing the fortress for an accomplice. We suspect they are still nearby, and may have been posing as kitchen staff. Everyone working this evening is being brought into the cellar for questioning. Am I correct in assuming that if you’re here the attacker is dead? Was there more than one?”

“Wait,” Ellana begged. She held up both hands and watched Leliana’s eyes flick between them. A thick layer of soot and blood made her a poor sight, and the burns on her palms didn’t help much either. “Yes, she’s dead — just the one — but hang on—” Somehow she’d turned up last to her own execution. “What’s going on? There are more? Was anyone else attacked? How did you know?”

“Mira,” Leliana answered. “She was escorted out of the party early, reportedly too intoxicated to stand. Josephine informed me she’d overindulged, while she maintained that she’d only had a single glass. After being brought to the clinic she managed to slip away and ended up in the kitchens, where she downed an entire pitcher of milk, vomited everywhere, then claimed she’d been poisoned and ordered a guard to find her in her quarters before passing out. The cook dismissed her as drunk but the guard took her seriously. On the way they saw the smoke rising from the back of the fortress, and so sent another guard to alert the Commander and myself of an attack while they ran ahead. Two went to retrieve you while I was waylaid relocating Mira before the scene gathered any more witnesses. There’s been no other reports of violence, it looks like you were the only target. And Mira by proxy.”

This had already spiralled into something far more complicated than she thought. “Is she going to be alright?”

“The medic advised several days of treatment, but she should be fine. The poison was not deadly. For now she’s been moved to the armoury until we find a better place to keep her while she recovers.”

There was a thoughtful pause.

Then, “Was it a sedative?” Ellana asked. “What was given to Mira.”

Sharp eyes and the tilt of her head signalled the Spymaster’s interest. “Yes. A powerful one. Likely slipped into her wine during dinner.” She dipped her chin. “Why do you ask?”

“The assassin seemed unprepared for a fight… or at least surprised by it.” She reflexively touched the wound in her left shoulder. There was fresh blood on her fingers when she pulled them away. The entire arm was drenched from end to end. Both from her own wounds as well as those she’d inflicted on her attacker. She continued, “I think she had expected me to stay asleep. Get in and out quickly. If she’d succeeded it’s unlikely anyone would have found out before morning, which would have given her and any accomplices plenty of time to escape.”

Leliana began to reply, but was cut short when the door flew open. Cullen walked in, red-faced and rumpled with only half his armour on, looking like he’d just run a lap around the entire fortress half-dressed. Cassandra was close behind, half-way through asking a question. She did not look much better.
—if someone tries to leave?"

"I've doubled the guards at the gate and on the walls. No one is getting out without us knowing about it first. The portcullis has been closed and locked until further notice, and the… Maker's Breath!" When he caught sight of the Inquisitor seated on the stone, bloodied and bruised, it stopped him in his tracks. She'd not managed to catch her reflection on the way, but his expression told her that it was nothing short of ghastly.

When the shock wore off he made a few jerky, abortive, attempts to gesture at her injuries. Turned and demanded, "Hasn't anyone gotten her a damn potion yet?" to no one in particular.

Cassandra maneuvered around him — "Let me," — and descended the stone stairs toward the alchemy station. There was a basket of potions brewing there. Not as effective as if they’d reached their full ferment, but better than nothing.

Ellana tried to counter with humour. Flashed a small, crooked, smile. "You should see the other guy."

Despite himself, he returned it. "If this is what your victory looks like I should hope there’s not enough left of them to judge."

"Mission accomplished, then."

Cassandra whistled to get his attention, then tossed a bottle across the room. He caught it in his ungloved hand, pulled the cork out with his teeth, and handed it to Ellana. "Here," he urged, and spit the stopper onto the floor. He did not wait for her to finish drinking it before launching into a stream of rapid-fire questions. Not all of them directed at her. "How badly were you injured? Have we learned anything about the attacker? Was it Venatori? You should be in the infirmary. Maker, look at your arm!"

"No," Leliana cut across him. "We need to minimize collateral damage. Any treatment she needs happens here. Moving her anywhere else risks more witnesses, and witnesses ask questions. As it stands there are two who spoke to Mira in the kitchens, and another two that escorted the Inquisitor from the tower: they’ll all need to be spoken to regarding what they saw. Aside, most of her injuries appear superficial; she’s awake and alert and a few potions should take care of the rest. Once she’s in travelling shape I want her out of Skyhold."

"Out of Skyhold?" he repeated, incredulous. "If it’s witnesses you’re worried about how do you plan on pulling that off with the crowd outside? By mid-day tomorrow half the fortress will be gathered in the training yard to stare at the smoking ruins of the tower. It will take days to get everyone back to work. If we’re lucky!"

"Which is why she’s leaving before sunrise."

A beat. Then, "Are you joking?"

It was clear she wasn’t.

Cassandra rejoined them at the top of the steps. A pouch in one hand held another pair of potions, which she handed off to Ellana along with a bucket of water and a long, coiled, strip of linen taken from the basket of armour cast-offs.

"For the blood," she explained. Then to Leliana, "I can accompany her. A small party would arouse less suspicion than a full attendance of guards, and if made up of those of us who are already privy to sensitive information we’ll be better able to ensure she, and the destination, remain
uncompromised."

Ellana pulled their attention back to her with a sudden, sharp, breath sucked through clenched teeth. The water was freezing, captured from the glacial falls that flowed around this room, but soothing where the fire had burned through her nightdress. Blood, dirt, sweat, and soot washed away in rivers that pooled on the stone at her feet, slowly revealing the injuries beneath.

She laughed, and it was mirthless. “I don’t suppose I get a say in this, do I?”

She knew the answer before it was given, clearly writ upon her Spymaster’s face. Resolute; her expression smooth and still as glass.

“No,” she stated. It was clear that she would brook no argument. “Until we know how and why this happened we cannot risk you staying here. Mira’s ruse was as successful as we could have hoped but if there is another attempt we may not be so lucky. And with all the commotion there will be more eyes than ever. This is precisely the kind of situation her position was created for. She’s well-trained, confident, and we will be here to handle the transition. It is no longer safe for you to remain.”

Behind her the door burst open, admitting both Solas and a short, blonde, elf Ellana recognized as one of Leliana’s agents. Solas paused only briefly in the threshold to take in the scene. Then — looking a shade each furious and horrified — he turned upon the others. “What happened!?”

“I asked him to wait but he refused,” offered Charter thinly. “He’s gone barrelling into near every room searching for you. Making all sorts of noise.”

“It’s fine,” Leliana replied, but the terse smile made a poor cover of her disapproval. “If you could help Jana in the cellar and wait for me there, please.”

Charter ducked her head in acknowledgement and pulled the door closed.

No one had offered him an answer in the twenty seconds since he asked, so Solas began to press the question again. Cullen volunteered, “There was an attempt on the Inquisitor’s life. The assassin made it into the tower, but was unsuccessful.”

He scoffed, “Clearly!” then yelled, “Were there no guards stationed in the hall? No reports of suspicious movements? Did anyone see them? Who were they and how did they get here? How was this allowed to happen!?” and he gestured emphatically toward Ellana. As if the blood she’d spilled were damning evidence of the soldiers’ dereliction of duty.

The accusation was not a fair one. “Solas,” she warned. Gently, as it was clear he was shaken. The few times she’d been witness to his fear laid so bare were typically followed by this same righteous anger. Flares of his temper were fleeting and rare but he always burned hottest when it came to her. It wasn’t something many saw.

Cullen blinked, a little taken aback by the display. “Of course there were guards! There are soldiers stationed throughout the fortress at all hours. Men and women I trust implicitly. None would knowingly let an attacker through. No one ‘allowed’ it to happen — we are still learning the details.”

“Then how can you be sure?” he snapped.

“He only just got here too, Solas,” Ellana said — a little firmer. He bit his cheek and pressed his mouth into a tight line to keep from going on, but did not have the grace to look at all abashed.
She twisted the rag between her hands, wringing out the murky, soiled, water onto the floor before wetting it in the bucket again. Winced when she pressed it to her shoulder. There was so much filth caked onto her skin that it took several passes of just moving it around before she started to come clean.

“It was a single person,” she began, to all of them. Taking the time to look at each in turn. “She came in over the balcony, not through the front door. Scaled the wall. She would’ve had to slip between patrols on the ramparts, which is easier to do at night, and she was skilled with stealth so it’s unlikely anyone saw or heard her.” She nodded at Leliana. “Mira was poisoned at dinner. A sedative. The attacker clearly intended to dose and kill me while I slept. Fortunately, Mira has considerable experience with poisons and was apparently able to recognize the one used and alert a guard to come check on me.

“In the meantime I fought off the attacker, though in the process the room caught fire. Guards arrived just after I managed to kill her. One pulled me out of the tower before I could suffer worse. I’d intended to stay and try to rescue papers, work — meaningless things. If I had I’d have likely been killed.”

To Solas specifically, “I owe the guards my life,” she added.

While she talked his gaze flit between her face and shoulder, though whatever his feelings were on the situation beyond concern for her injuries was hard to say. Only once she finished the tale did he finally close the distance between them. Kneeled on the floor in front of her so he could move her hand, and the cloth it held, aside. Get a closer look at the wound.

She winced as his fingers probed the edges. “Were you stabbed?”

“It was thrown,” Ellana corrected. “She missed.”

Their eyes met and his brow tightened — heavy — with something uneasy. Unspoken.

“Do you know who she represents, if not Venatori?” Leliana cut in. Cullen gave her a questioning look. “Even if she had an accomplice she still attacked alone. It’s not typically how the Venatori operate.”

“She was not associated with them,” Ellana replied. “I’d say, ‘I’d bet my life on it’ but I suppose I already did that.” The attempt at gallows humour rewarded her with the flicker of a smile from her advisors. “For one, she was an elf.”

Solas’ attention had shifted back to her shoulder, but for that he paused his work. “Not Dalish?”

“No — city. Orlesian. Val Royeaux I think, going by her accent. She’d been posing as an imports merchant in the yard.”

Cullen raised a brow. “Did you know her?”

She shook her head. “Not personally, no. But Dorian and I had a run-in with her earlier this week when we visited her stall. She did not recognize me as the Inquisitor, but we did exchange a few words. That was the only reason I knew it was her: she had some very strong opinions on the Inquisitor’s handling of Orlais’ alienages.”

Cassandra frowned. “That is not something the Inquisition has any control over.”

“I don’t really think that mattered to her. She had plenty to say, and none of it flattering. Ultimately, the goal of this attack was to remove what she believed was a figurehead for the
Chantry and allow another — someone with more power or connections — to lead in my place. She spoke of her people needing protection. As an elf, I had failed to represent the interests of my own kind, and for being Dalish that insult was worse. She thought anyone else would be better suited.”

“Her concerns are not without merit,” Cullen mused. Then, when all eyes turned to him, back-pedalled. Quickly. “I’m not saying I agree! Only that violence against city elves has seen an increase and there isn’t much we’ve been able to do about it. There’s been reports nearly every time we are in Orlais, but with so much of our resources spent on Corypheus our hands have been tied. Soldiers intervene where they can, of course, but action is needed on a much larger scale to truly address the problem.”

“Could we not send troops for protection?” asked Cassandra.

“How well do you think that would go?” he countered. “Marching into Orlais with a cavalcade of soldiers ready to defend one group of inhabitants against the other?”

“Choosing not to act on this knowledge is endorsement of those responsible,” she argued. “Inaction is not neutrality. What if we sent an envoy to represent the Inquisition’s interest in assisting with granting protections to vulnerable populations? It would include alienages, but not be exclusive to them.”

“Not without risking some of the alliances we depend upon for trade and travel,” said Leliana. “Historically, Orlais has not exactly been amenable to that kind of interference. If we tried a less overt approach — possibly. But there are different risks to consider.”

Firmly, “If we can do something, we should,” said Ellana. “If this woman was motivated enough to travel all the way out here just to die for the cause she might make a martyr of herself. Then others could follow. I’m not as worried about my life as I am determined not to see anyone else throw themselves on the pyre. Additionally, she mentioned my clan by name. Have we had any communication from them? Any reports?”

“None that I am aware of,” answered Leliana. “The last letter we received was nearly a year ago, and was personal in nature. But if you are concerned I can send contacts to them.”

“Yes, please. It might be bluster, but just in case it isn’t we should follow up. Write to Keeper Deshana, ask her if there has been any threats against the clan. If this is a sentiment spreading because of me I would see them protected from it.”

This was typically the part where Solas jumped in; started on subterfuge, factions, and political violence. He might not have terribly strong opinions on the divide between Dalish and city elves, but when it came to the politics of class systems and worship of leaders he could go on.

Instead, he was oddly quiet on this issue. His attention focused entirely on her wounds — cleaning and examining. When he did speak it was only to comment on them. “You are fortunate: a little to the left and it might have severed the tendon. The recovery could have taken weeks.”

It already looked better than it was when she arrived, the regeneration potion had seen to that, but Solas still cupped a palm against her skin to administer a healing spell. It prickled, deep, as the muscle fibres knit back together — and when he took his hand away the worst was gone. A thin layer of new skin stretched across the gash.

“This will need sutures to prevent a scar,” he added, as an afterthought.
Ellana tested the motion of her arm. Wiggled her fingers. The skin was tight, but it would do for now. “Then it will be something to remember her by. We won’t have time for sutures, I’m leaving by morning.”

He frowned. “Leaving? Where?”

“Somewhere safe,” provided Leliana.

Solas turned and met the Spymaster’s gaze. A moment of tense silence passed as he considered the implications of her evasiveness. Then, flatly, “You do not intend for me to accompany her,” he said.

It was not a question.

And she owed him no answers — this he knew.

What she gave was as a gesture of respect rather than obligation.

“I intend to utilize a safe house known only by a select group of people. That list is small, and needs to remain so lest we compromise our ability to use it in the future. Her stay there will be temporary: it’s not set up as a birth house, so she’ll need to move to a secondary location regardless. This is only to keep her safe for the immediate future. A few weeks… maybe more. During which time there’s no reason to disclose its existence to anyone else simply by virtue of their romantic attachment.”

“Surely an argument can be made of the necessity of an escort,” he countered, rising to his feet. “She cannot travel without protection in this state, and especially not after the injury she’s suffered this evening.”

Leliana remained stoic even as he began to fray. “She will not be alone, but the party that accompanies her will be one made of those capable of maintaining objectivity.” Careful emphasis sharpened the words to a fine point. The reasoning was sound, and her confidence in it unwavering… but the blow still stung.

Beside her, Cullen winced. Cast his eyes to the floor and rubbed at the back of his neck in the way he often did when he was uncomfortable. But he did not disagree.

“And this is not something you believe me capable of.”

“I’m sorry, Solas,” she said, instead of an answer. There was no malice in her words. “You are too close to this. It would be difficult for anyone to separate their duties of guard and partner well enough to adequately perform both. And this situation is uniquely complicated by her state. If I can avoid putting you in a position where you have to maintain that balance, it would be better for both of you.”

He held her gaze and tightened his jaw — but said nothing. Swallowing the protests ready on his tongue lest he make her point for her.

She continued, “Ultimately final say of the party comes down to her. I can be overruled, but—” And her eyes slid to Ellana. “—this is a recommendation I would give regardless of who the target was. Beyond the necessity of secrecy, the presence of a romantic partner in a protective mission becomes complicated very easily, and very quickly. I would not suggest it if I believed it unnecessary.”

Ellana pressed her fingers to her temples. “No, I know, but—” It was tacit agreement. Solas spun
back, lips parted, but she cut him off before he managed a word. “Just give me a minute to think, alright? A lot has happened in the last hour!”

The ghost of a smile curled the corner of Leliana’s mouth. Compassion — or pity. It was gone just as quickly. “Unfortunately I can’t grant you much. Ideally I’d like you on the road no later than an hour from now. We’ll need to gather those you’re taking with you, and pack only essentials. Everything else will be waiting for you at the house.”

Solas scoffed quietly. Smoothed a hand over his head. It was unlike him to dismiss a threat so readily.

“You disagree with the timeline?” she asked him.

There was no hesitation in his answer. “We have faced threats far greater than this in many of the places we’ve travelled. Your wounds have not yet had a chance to be properly treated, and you could have days of riding ahead of you. I don’t believe we have enough evidence to outweigh the risk of putting you on the road without rest, medicine, or adequate preparation. There’s no reason to presume this attack was anything more than a single individual acting on their own interests.”

“There’s no reason to presume it wasn’t, either,” Leliana countered darkly. She’d been sympathetic, but it was clear his attitude was beginning to wear on her. “It could end with this attack, or it could be the start of a series of attempts. Better to overreact than under-prepare. If an investigation finds nothing she can be safely moved to the birth house in half the time, at which point you can join her there.”

It was clear he was not happy with the answer. Shaking his head, he began to pace. The chill that had fallen over the group had little to do with the night air, and was getting colder by the minute.

Cassandra tried her hand at dispersing it. “You said she was Orlesian…” She looked to Ellana for confirmation, and at her nod turned her attention to Solas. “Did you learn anything at the Winter Palace that might be relevant? Did anyone say anything to you? Bull had mentioned that the servants seemed more hostile toward the Inquisition on this visit than the one previous — did you notice that as well?”

There was the smallest, slightest, pause before he replied.

“No.”

In it, Ellana saw something damning.

It was subtle. *Oh, so subtle.* A twitch in his jaw. The slightest movement of his chin. A quick little breath before he spoke. Cracks in the façade hid in places only she knew where to look; hints of deception in an answer otherwise delivered with the same flawless execution as all the other lies he’d told.

His tells were virtually imperceptible. Practiced. He had a talent for twisting omission with misdirection in a way that allowed him to rely on presumption without ever having to resort to total, bald-faced, fiction. Give just enough of a push for someone to assume, and not correct them. Assure that, in a way, they lied to themselves.

But that wasn’t the case this time. This time it was just a lie.

And she was furious for what that meant.

They were all talking — arguing and speculating over how great a threat there was to her. If
someone intent to kill her would risk harm to civilians or soldiers. If this could be leveraged by the Venatori. Little pieces of conversation floated by; just a word here and there. Once her heart began to hammer everything else faded to a dull roar. Lost to the storm churning in her breast; a surging tide of quiet anger.

When she could find her voice, “Give me the room,” she said in a clipped tone. If she kept herself from boiling over she could play it off like she needed a moment alone with Solas to discuss their options.

She had to repeat it a second time before anyone heard her.

They all stopped. Exchanged glances. Cassandra looked uneasily between all three. Solas looked at her.

"I'm sorry?” Cullen asked.

“Give me the room.” A third time. Then she added, “Everyone except you,” and trained a hawkish gaze on Solas. He appeared surprised by the order, but the look conveyed no real sincerity — the raised brows and tilted chin were not for her benefit. He knew what she’d seen in him.

There was one moment more of hesitation before, one by one, the others turned and exited into the hall. Leliana last. She held the door open, warning, “Do not tarry long,” and waited for Ellana’s nod of understanding before she, too, left.

Once alone Ellana leapt to her feet, nearly tripping over the sheet in her rush. Still clutched tight to her waist it made flimsy cover against the icy winds blowing in from the open wall — but it was better than nothing. Her ire kept her warmer.

“What do you know?”

It was not at all surprising that his first answer would be a wholly inadequate one. “About the attack? Less than you do, surely.”

“Your network is still active,” she bit in return. Pointing an accusing finger at his chest. “You told me of it on the night you told me everything. Spies and soldiers. Then later, with the orb — you have agents. You have informants. You have connections and reports and you fucking know something! I never pressed for more when I should have and that is on me, but you also didn’t volunteer it after telling me you would not keep things again. You allowed me to go merrily on my way not thinking about the fact that you are passing information under my nose, because lying by omission comes so fucking naturally to you that it barely registers as an offence!”

A strange little memory pushed its way to the forefront of her mind, giving answer to a question she hadn’t known to ask. She winced for the insight it granted her. Swore, “Fenedhis, you keep the messages in your desk. You even have people here, don’t you?”

He looked as though he might interject there, but she cut him off. Storming forward in two quick steps. She lifted her chin and held his gaze with eyes that were dark and furious. “I will ask you once more. What—” Every word ground through clenched teeth as if each were a curse. “—do you know?”

For a moment he did nothing. Said nothing. Barely even breathed. His eyes darting between hers, back and forth, as he considered. Then his shoulders sank — defeated.

He pointed a raised hand at the door and cast a spell. A glyph appeared upon its surface, flickered with brilliant light, and as it faded so did the noise that carried in from the hall beyond.
Finally, he said, “I knew only that there were whispers. There was no reason to suspect the information I was passed represented a legitimate threat. In the context it was given it was a power play, nothing more. Exaggerated at best, a complete fabrication at worst.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion on it. What were you told?”

“Nothing you don’t already know.”

Her voice was like ice. “Tell me anyway.”

There was another pause, then a deep breath he took through his nose. To centre, or perhaps brace himself. “The same things you reported the assassin said to you: that you were a puppet of the Chantry, that you acted on their interests and furthered their goals, that you were a false idol.”

“Did you know there would be an attack?”

“No. Just that there had been a report of those sentiments heard in a Val Royeaux alienage. You must understand, the implication was only that the sentiment existed, not that it had or would have resulted in any movement against you.” This was damage control, now. One part minimizing, two parts pleading. “Even with the events of this evening we have no evidence that’s become the case. This was a single person, not an organized faction. Additionally, the information was not passed to me by an informant in my trust, but instead by someone looking to leverage an embellished report to gain personal favour. The entire encounter was orchestrated to manipulate me; any information delivered with it loses credibility.”

Somehow this only felt like half the story. “What for? Do they know who you are?”

He gave her a hard look. “You are the only one who does.”

“Then what would this someone possibly get out of it?”

“Debt is a more valuable trade than blackmail, particularly across political lines. A favour could be called upon in a situation that might have otherwise resulted in capture, or death.”

“I’m sorry, ‘blackmail’?” That was not a point she was going to let slip away between arguments — he would not have mentioned it unless it was relevant somehow.

But he was also hesitant to expand on it, so she pressed him again. “Solas.”

“She was in possession of evidence that could expose our…” There was a pause while he considered the most appropriate term. One hand turning circles in the air. “…entanglement. It was returned, rather than utilized.”

“Who is ‘she’? What did she have?”

He turned a half-circle and began walking back and forth between her and the door. While he paced he brushed his mouth with a thumb, rubbed at the back of his head, scratched his shoulder and adjusted the tie on one of his sleeves. Tics to relieve nervous energy. “You recall the Marquis — Brialia? Formerly the Empress’ spymaster, she now serves her own interests since her position in court has been elevated. Though her information trades mostly go through Leliana, this one was brought to me specifically.” His eyes caught hers briefly before darting to the floor again, counting his steps. “Your necklace. The one Josephine had made for you. The coincidence is intentional. Should you have used what you found to expose her affair she likely would have done the same to you, but since you returned it she acted in kind.”
Ellana touched her fingers to her collarbone. “I thought I’d lost that.” She had not seen it in some time. “I don’t understand, that had nothing to do with you, why would…” The question trailed off, unfinished, as she turned the timeline and players over in her mind.

If it was Brialala it would have to be Halamshiral. If it was Halamshiral it would have been a time they were together there. Somewhere the necklace could have reasonably been lost without her noticing.

There was only one place that stood out as a real possibility.

Quietly, “Fuck,” she whispered.

“Indeed,” he replied, without humour. “The report of the alienage rumour was not the purpose of the meeting; if there was any merit to it she would have gone to your Spymaster directly. Instead the meet was arranged entirely with the intent to manipulate me. Securing a position as a contact who had chosen not to trade in damaging information when she had the chance to. The real value was in the item — whatever rumours she passed along the way were frivolity.”

“Did she see us?”

“That was implied, yes.”

“Then does she know this, too?” She gestured to her stomach.

Rather than answer he cast his gaze aside. He looked guilty, instead of frustrated. Cornered.

The speed of his pacing picked up, and her eyes followed him back and forth across the landing.

“You didn’t think it was important to tell me any of this? To warn me that someone formerly under Celene’s employ, and still loyal to her, knows absolutely everything or that there was the possibility of a threat to me?”

He threw both his hands up. “What would you have done with the information? Ban Orlesian elves from entering Skyhold? Conduct interviews at the gates? It was not a warning, it was gloating — offered only to lend weight to the idea she was being generous. There was no way to track or verify it. Wasting resources and causing needless alarm.”

“I don’t know what I would have done Solas, but I would have at least had the option to think it over! Somehow I have to wonder if the real reason you chose not to share this was to avoid the embarrassment of admitting you’d been caught.”

“It was not relevant!”

“You aren’t the judge of that! We’ve had this argument before, remember? Recently, even!”

“That is beside the point.”

“That is exactly the point, Solas. You knew this should have been communicated to me, you knew it wasn’t your place to keep it, and yet you did. Leliana is right: you cannot think objectively when it comes to my safety. If we are put in another situation where there is an imminent threat I cannot trust that you won’t do something rash under the guise of protecting me.”

“Do you truly think I would be so reckless? My mind so clouded by feeling that I would be rendered incapable of acting appropriately in a crisis?”
Pointedly, “You are literally standing here admitting you withheld vital information about the possibility of a radicalized group of Elvish assassins to spare me the risk of becoming frustrated chasing the source,” she replied.

He gave her a look. “That is an exaggeration.”

“Not much of one!” She threw her arms up, lost to the heat of the argument, and the sheet dropped to the floor. For a moment she’d forgotten all she wore was the burned-up nightdress and a dust cover the guard retrieved from the hall. She cursed softly as she bent to retrieve it, tying it securely around her waist.

The time it took to do so allowed Solas a moment to breathe. To gentle his tone. “Do not ask that I not accompany you out of a need to punish me.”

“That’s not what this is,” Ellana sighed. “You have proven over and over that I cannot trust you will treat me as a leader while you are my lover, but I’m not punishing you for that. I am realizing it’s unfair to expect. This is to spare us both unnecessary hardship. And with your experience surely you can understand the need for the locations of safe houses to remain a secret? To limit travel to and from them?”

“Yes, but I did not break up families!”

Her brows knit in an expression of disbelief. “Is that really what you think she’s doing?”

A sigh, then, “No,” he admitted. And for a moment stopped his pacing. Closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

The worst of her anger had ebbed. Looking at him now she could only see a man bereaved and desperate. It wasn’t about his pride anymore. She asked, “What would you have done in her place? If you were the one giving orders? Let the worried husband come along to add a complication to the operation?”

He turned on a heel; started pacing again. “No, but I am—”

“Different?” she offered.

“Yes!”

Even as the word left his lips he saw it for the lie it was, and his face fell. If not a lie, then a wish — that his love be worth more than that of another man.

The pacing slowed, then stopped, and he dropped to his knees upon the floor before her. Hands around the back of her legs and his forehead rest upon her thighs. He closed his eyes, and breathed.

She slid her hands over his, and held them. Then, gently, “In the Inquisition you are nothing but a proud man and an expert on the Fade,” she said. “Leliana does not know of your origins. Your experience. You’re a civilian — not a veteran. You’ve crafted yourself a splendid disguise, ma vhenan, and she has secrets to keep from common men. She cannot afford to be careless simply to honour your heart. Why would she take that risk?”

The next breath was a shudder. The one after, too. In and out with in careful measure. He squeezed her hands.

“Please.”
She wanted to be angry. She wanted to be furious that he would have the audacity to beg on his knees after all of this. She wanted to deny that the quiver in his voice made her eyes sting, and want to change her mind on the whim of her heart.

Instead she said, “Your shirt is on backward.”

He frowned. Looked down at himself to verify it, then back up at her. Brows knit in confusion.

“When you thought something might have happened to me you were in such a hurry to leave, to find me, that you threw on your clothes and did not check your appearance. You ran in and out of rooms like that — barely-dressed and frantic… were you just looking for a friend?” She smiled, but it was a half-hearted thing. “I don’t think it’s an oversight you would’ve made if it were anyone else.”

He said nothing in reply.

He couldn’t.

So she said it instead. “Bull and Sera have the necessary experience, and Cassandra has been both unwaveringly loyal and has shown she is more than willing to stand against me if the situation calls for it. I trust them, and they will take care on the journey. Both to get me to the safe house, and to help me move elsewhere when it’s time to.”

“Will you not even take a mage?” he pleaded. “Dorian, at least. If something should happen…”

“I will be safe, Solas,” she replied. “The less who accompany me, the better — and my choices should be limited to those with a relevant background. It is only a few weeks. We’ve been apart far longer.” She slipped one hand out of his and drew her fingers along his skin. Up his arm, shoulder, and neck. Cradled his cheek in her palm. Swiped a thumb along the plush of his bottom lip.

There were a hundred questions, arguments, and protests swimming in his eyes when he met her gaze. A plea on his tongue when he parted his lips. But no place to say them.

So instead he closed his eyes and kissed her palm.

There was a flash behind them. The door pushed open, breaking the silencing spell, and a cacophony of noise followed. Louder than before — there were more people in the hall now.

Leliana stepped inside, pausing only briefly to take in the scene of Solas kneeled at her feet. Intimate — private — but she did not shy from it.

She held out a folded shirt and pants; lifted her elbow, to gesture at a heavy wrap slung there. “I’m sorry, but you need to leave soon. Many of Skyhold’s staff and civilians have begun to gather in the yard. We’ve been able direct them away from the front gate, but that won’t hold. There is no better time to leave — we may not be able to corral the crowd much longer. Here—” She dropped the clothes on the floor, near Solas’ feet. “—These are from our surplus, and will keep you warm while you travel. Unfortunately I can’t find much in the way of armour, but Sera did have a spare bow and quiver to arm you with.”

“Thank you, I’ll be out in a moment,” said Ellana. “Please have Bull, Sera, and Cassandra meet me at the gates.”

She nodded.

And was kind enough not to let her gaze linger on Solas when she left.
It took 12 minutes to reach the gate.

Bull and Cassandra were already waiting, mounted up, ready with several packs of supplies divided between them. Sera had arrived with Ellana, having met up in the hall on her way out. She’d been awakened by the commotion, before Leliana came to fetch her, and wandered over to see the chaos for herself.

Dorian and Varric stood back. They’d managed to persuade Leliana to allow them a goodbye since they were already nearby. They were flanked by Solas.

“Got this bow for you,” said Sera, and she shrugged for emphasis. Two were strapped to her back along with an overfilled quiver packed with sheaf arrows and a handful of enchanting experiments she’d received from Dagna. She dropped to one knee to offer Ellana a leg up onto her mount.

It was less graceful than usual, but that was owed to the poor rest and early hour. Exhaustion had already begun to take its toll on those who’d had little sleep. The sun would rise before they reached the basin, which meant travel would extend into the late afternoon before an appropriate camp was found. From there it would be three days before they recovered from the missed sleep. But the situation called for a swift exit; comfortable travel was a luxury they couldn’t afford.

The bridge was dark as pitch — if they carried no torches they’d be invisible against the backdrop of night. Slip away unnoticed. There was so much commotion in the yard no one would even hear the clanking of the portcullis drawn just high enough to let them through.

Once settled on her hart Ellana nodded toward Cullen. He signalled his understanding and then ducked into the gatehouse to man the crank. All the other guards had been dismissed for a mandatory break.

When the chain began to tighten and the iron gate rise up, Solas felt his heart surge into his throat. He swallowed hard, and tried to ignore the pounding of his pulse. He could feel it in his neck and in his gut.

In his arm?

Then tapping on his elbow, more insistently.

He looked down. Varric stood beside him. The dwarf jerked his head toward the party at the gates. “Go,” he said.

“I cannot,” Solas replied, and loathed the way his voice sounded in shaking whisper.

“If you don’t say goodbye properly you’ll regret it,” Varric urged. Again he gestured with his chin. The gate was slower worked by a single man. Maybe a minute more before they left.

“You’ll be miserable. She’ll be miserable. You’ll think about it every day. Go.”

He didn’t understand. “I’m not certain—”

Varric had no intention of explaining it to him. Instead, he shoved him.
Surprised, Solas stumbled forward, but caught himself before he toppled over. Then found he was somehow still falling.

No — walking.

Then running. Toward her. He couldn’t stop.

The gate was half-way up. Sera kicked her heel into her mount to spur it forward and ducked beneath. Cassandra followed behind. Bull would take the rear, so gave a gentle signal to the Inquisitor to move on.

“Ellana!” Solas cried. And she turned.

He didn’t remember there being a decision made; there was no thought of proper goodbyes, of their friends who’d bear witness, or any thought at all. It just happened. He ran up beside her, captured her face in both his hands, and then he was kissing her.

Terribly. Wonderfully. Deeply.

Over and over again. Like he would die without it.

He didn’t stop until she put her hands upon his wrists, gently. Traced her fingers over sensitive skin. A soft, guiding, touch to remind him to breathe. In the moment, he’d forgotten how. He did not want to if it meant they’d part.

She rest her forehead against his. Rubbed little circles against his wrist bones with her thumbs.

Then she kissed him once more. Smaller, and softer.

“Vhenan,” he whispered. “Ma vhenan. Ar lath ma, i’tel ma vhenan dana. Ma dar’eth shiral, sathan.”

She smiled. “I love you, too. I will.”

He didn’t remember the moment she pulled away, nor the last kiss she placed upon his lips before she left. Only that he held his fingers there as if he could keep it. And then stood in stoic silence, watching through the closed gate as her shadow disappeared somewhere along the bridge.

He stayed until the sun rose.

Until Varric touched a hand upon his elbow and led him away. Graciously, he did not speak of her — nor of the tear stains drying on his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

TRANSLATIONS:

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